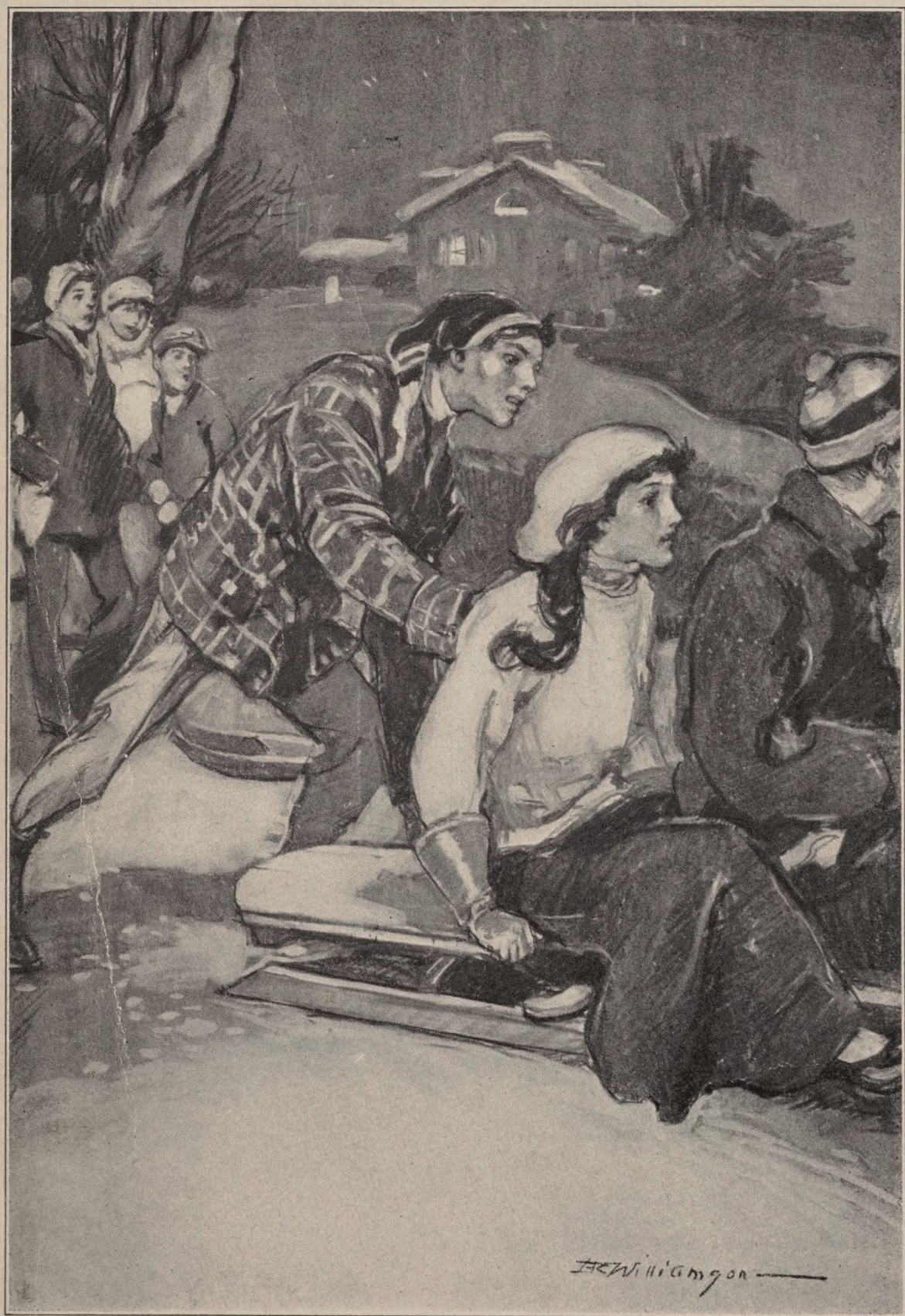




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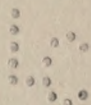
“HOLD TIGHT,” HE ORDERED

HELEN and the Fifth Cousins

The Adventure with Judith, the Hermit,
and Some Other People

By BETH BRADFORD GILCHRIST

Author of "Helen Over-the-Wall,"
"Helen and the Uninvited Guests,"
"Helen and the Find-Out Club," etc.



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Introduction

HELEN THAYER is the kind of girl who is always having adventures. Every girl has them, more or less, and Helen's have strayed into print. There was the adventure with the fairy godmother who wasn't — But those of you who have read "Helen Over-the-Wall" know all about the fairy godmother and Helen's delightful summer at "Red Top." If you have read "Helen and the Uninvited Guests," you know what happened after Helen went home from "Red Top" and the Yellow Goggles Lady led the train of unbidden visitors that came to Helen's house. Then Helen tried to play fairy godmother herself and Maybe Anne arrived at the house across the street. When that happened, Helen and Gay Flint, Grace Howe, Estelle Lawrence, and the rest had to organize the Find-Out Club. You would be obliged to start a Find-Out Club yourself, if a Maybe Anne should come to live in your town. Anne initiated Judith French, who hadn't even a maybe grandfather, but who was, for all that, the most cheerful of likable girls. Why *Maybe* Anne? It is all ex-

INTRODUCTION

plained in "Helen and the Find-Out Club." I shall have to ask you to look it up if you don't know, because I can hear Helen and the other girls chattering just over a page or two and I really can't keep them waiting.

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Helen and the Fifth Cousins

Helen and the Fifth Cousins

CHAPTER I

WANTED : A SECRET

THE Find-Out Club stared at each other with mingled incredulity and consternation.

"Say that again, Helen." Estelle Lawrence's mournful eyes lifted a beseeching look to Helen's. "I didn't quite get it."

Grace Howe adjusted her bracelet excitedly. "You're crazy, Helen. Stark crazy."

Anne Alden interposed swiftly. "She is not crazy. It is the truth."

"Worse luck!" groaned Gay Flint.

"What is the truth?" demanded Sally Rollins, her tie under one ear. "You'll have to say it again, Helen."

"You may have to say it twenty times," said Mary Tracy, "before we get used to the idea."

"I don't want to get used to it, if it's anything that is going to spoil F. O. C." Grace stuck her fingers in her ears. "I won't listen."

"We won't let it spoil the Find-Out Club," said

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Gay. "So you might as well take your hands down, Gracie. You won't be able to help plan what to do if you don't listen. Now, Helen."

"It just popped into my head," Helen cried. "I didn't want to think of it, and it scares me just as much as it does the rest of you."

"Say it," commanded Gay relentlessly.

"I said, 'Why, we can't be the Find-Out Club any longer!'"

"And we can't."

Anne's delicate face that had so lately learned lines of happiness paled under Gay's words. "You said," she remonstrated, "that we could be. You said so a minute ago."

Gay waved a remorseless hand. "That's not the point now. That's another point. The point now is to understand why we're not any longer the Find-Out Club."

"But we are!" Grace jumped to her feet. "We are! I won't stop being. I refuse ——"

"What is there left for us to find out?"

Grace collapsed like a punctured balloon under the point of Gay's question. The immaculate plaits of her skirt rumped under her as she sank to the flowered chintz of Anne's biggest chair. For once she had no thought of clothes. "Why, why—that's so!" she gasped.

"It seems almost a pity," meditated Mary

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Tracy, "that we found Anne's Aunt Alice. If we hadn't, of course we might have gone on hunting—we might be hunting now."

"No!" Anne's voice was as positive as her chin. "It is not a pity. I am glad you found her. Even if—even if——" The words stuck in her throat.

"I am glad, too," cried Helen, slipping a comforting arm around Anne's waist. "Even if we have to change the name of F. O. C."

"It won't be F. O. C. under another name," mourned Grace.

Anne's eyes traveled wistfully over the group. "I want you all to be glad I found Aunt Alice."

Sally pounced on Anne and hugged her. "There wouldn't have been any F. O. C. if it hadn't been for you and your Aunt Alice."

"But now there is no F. O. C. because of me, and because I have found her."

"There's got to be an F. O. C.," said Grace, "even if we have to get another object."

"Now you're shouting!"

Six heads turned toward Gay at the words. That young lady, sprawling in gentlemanly fashion on the hearth-rug, gathered herself more compactly together and sat up. "Point number one. Is the object that F. O. C. was organized to effect now accomplished? In other words, my friends,

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is Anne Alden Dorinda Lewis? Answer: Anne Alden is twins, so far as anybody is ever going to be able to prove. *Quod erat demonstrandum*, by Mr. Lathrop and Mrs. Royce, assisted by the Find-Out Club in the person of its charter member, Miss Helen Thayer. Has anybody any objections to make to this statement?"

"I belong to grandfather," insisted Anne.

"It seems to cover the ground," acknowledged Mary Tracy.

"Ergo, F. O. C. hasn't anything left to find out, and what are we going to do about it? That's point number two. Miss Howe has the floor."

"You know I didn't mean anything in particular, Gay. If we changed the object, I suppose we'd have to change the name, and I tell you I'd hate to do that."

"Why change the object?" asked Mary Tracy.

"You know perfectly well, Spud, that Anne ——"

"Yes, Gracie, but I rather like finding out things."

"Oh, I see!" cried Helen. "We can find out something else, now that we have finished with Anne. I like that."

"It suits me," Estelle agreed good-naturedly. "But what shall we find out?"

"Who, you mean," chuckled Sally.

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"Not necessarily," interposed Gay. "We must be careful now."

"I like *whos* better than *whats*," Helen said. "But won't that mean we shall have to take in another member?"

"I think," a bright spot glowed in each of Anne's cheeks, "I think it would be lovely to find some people for Judith."

The soft determined words pushed their way through the clamor of tongues until Judith's name fell on silence. Then a shout rose.

"That's it! The very thing."

"Oh, Anne, *Anne*! You darling!"

"I was just going to suggest it myself."

"Judith's such a dandy. And she'll like to have 'folks.'"

"Are you sure, Grace?"

"What girl wouldn't, Spud?"

"Judith is odd, and she seems so crazy over that baby that she takes care of. But I think — You're right, of course."

"Of course I am. Didn't you see her face in this room last week when we were all saying Anne had the best relatives in the world except ours and Judith didn't except anybody at first and then she said Johnny was the best? I could have cried."

"But she looked as cheerful as pie when she said it," objected Sally.

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"That was why I wanted to cry," explained Grace. "I guess, Mary Tracy, if you had lived in an asylum most all your life and only come out of it to work for your living taking care of a baby that wasn't any relation to you all the time you weren't in school, you'd be glad to find some folks that belonged to you!"

"It would depend on who they were," said Mary. "I'd rather not know about 'em if they weren't nice."

"I wouldn't," said Anne. "I should want to know just the same whether they were nice or not."

"But they might be horrid," expostulated Sally. "Thieves or tramps or—or ——"

"Not if they were related to Judith," Gay corrected her. "Catch Judith being cousin to a tramp!"

"We don't want a cousin, do we?" Helen inquired. "A cousin might not think he needed to do anything about Judith. He might let her be where she is."

"An uncle, I should think." Gay's tone was judicial.

"Why a man, Gay?"

"It's got to be a man, Spud, if we can possibly make it a man."

"But why?"

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"Because a woman—a woman ——" Gay cast about for words to frame the idea that was struggling in her usually ready mind. "Well, a woman generally likes boys better and a man likes girls. And if a woman hasn't much money and has a lot to do, she thinks more than a man does about whether she can afford a niece—some women do, I mean."

"Judith's people must have money," said Grace decidedly. "Don't tell me, Gay Flint, you'd find anybody for Judith without money."

"An uncle—with money ——" Estelle tapped the points off on her fingers. "And nice."

"Awfully nice," put in Sally.

"A bachelor?"

"Oh, no, Estelle, Judith loves big families. There must be a baby, too."

"If he has a big family, Helen, he won't have so much money to spend on Judith," objected Grace.

"Judith won't mind that, if there's a baby for her to fuss over," said Helen.

"If he has money enough, it won't matter," suggested Mary Tracy.

Gay came out of the brown study she had been absorbed in. "Make him a great-uncle," she commanded. "If he was anything nearer I'm certain he couldn't have been mislaid long enough for Judith to get into an orphan asylum."

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"*I* know," cried Helen. "He made his money in mines. He was making it while Judith was little and when her father and mother died he was away off in the mountains of Nevada or Oregon or somewhere like that and no mail ever got to him ——"

"Like Anne's aunt," suggested Grace eagerly.

"Yes, exactly like Anne's aunt. So he never heard of his nephew's death until years afterward when he was a rich man and he came east to see him. Then he hunted and hunted, but all he could find was a record of his death. He was his favorite nephew, I think." Helen's eyes were shining now, she was absorbed in the joys of imagination. "And he had always intended to make him his heir, the great-uncle had, I mean. He couldn't find his nephew's wife and child either, though in some roundabout way he heard a rumor that the wife was dead. He supposed the child must be dead, too. So at last after years of searching and worrying and following false clues that turned his hair from black to gray he gave it up and went back west and married a girl he had loved when a boy in the east and they have a big family—something like three girls and four boys *and* a baby. They're living in the east now, in this very state, and he hasn't the slightest idea that the daughter of his favorite nephew is just

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hungering for his love almost on his very doorstep."

"My goodness, Helen! Who is he? How did you know it?" Grace was out of her chair now, hanging breathlessly over Helen's.

"How did I know what?" A little disconcerted, very much surprised, Helen stared back at Grace.

"Who he is—where he lives—all you've been telling us!"

With a whoop Gay stretched out flat and beat the hearth-rug with joyous hands.

Helen blinked. "Why, I—I—I don't really know it, Grace. I was just making up a story about him, about how it might be, you know."

"Furnish Gracie with his address, Helen." It was a voice from the hearth-rug. "She wants to call on him."

"You mean, Helen Thayer," Grace demanded, "that you made all that string up out of your own head, without anything at *all* to go on?"

Helen began to feel both bewildered and ashamed. "Why—why, yes," she faltered. "How could I have anything to go on?"

Anne pulled Grace down beside her. "I do not like stories very well. Not until they come true," she added loyally, remembering the story in Helen's fairy godmother letters to Fred and

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Emilie Parsons, the story that had brought about the discovery of her own aunt. "Let us all sit down now and talk—facts."

"Right!" approved Gay. "F. O. C. will please come to order."

"I want to say something else," Anne hesitated, "and I do not know quite how to say it."

"Miss Alden has the floor," said Gay.

Anne smiled on the faces turned to hers. "You all called me 'The Secret,'" she explained. "I think now that I ought to resign from being the Secret and let you elect Judith in my place."

"Good idea!" declared the president uncere-
moniously. "But you can't get out of having
been a secret, Anne. There are Secrets and Past-
Secrets. You'll be a P. S., that's all."

The business was transacted without a dissent-
ing vote.

"Now," declared Grace, "I want to know how
we are going to set to work to find Judith's
family."

The president yawned. "Something will turn
up. It did before."

"Is Helen going to write letters about Judith?"
Estelle inquired.

"Why, no, Estelle, I hadn't thought of it."

"Then I don't see how anything at all will be
likely to happen."

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"I move," said Sally, "that we do this differently from the way we managed with Anne. I move we all get busy."

"How?" asked Mary Tracy.

"Yes, how?" they all queried.

Six pairs of eyes turned on the president.

"Tell us how to get busy, Gay," said Estelle.

The long girl on the hearth-rug yawned again. "That isn't the way I'd do the thing, but I don't know that it much matters."

"It doesn't," said Helen, "so long as we do it."

"Well, then, think," Gay commanded. "Everybody think hard for five minutes."

"What about?"

"About Judith's relatives, Grace, and how to get at them."

Quiet fell on the room, an absorbed concentrated stillness. In the silence the seven girls thought according to their seven separate and distinct methods of thinking. Gay lay on her stomach, absolutely still, her face hidden on her folded arms. Grace fidgeted with her bracelet, turning the blue stones round and round. Sally Rollins hugged her knees and rocked herself back and forth on her low seat by the fire. Mary Tracy eyed the wall-paper unseeingly, her hands quiet in her lap. Estelle, her face in repose more than ever like that of a dolorous Princess of Romance, sat mournfully

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lovely in a big chintz chair, looking too pretty to have an idea in her head. Helen scowled desperately at the lower left hand corner of the bookcase. Anne looked at Helen, wistfulness, hope, and a certain funny fierceness blended in her expression.

There was nothing preposterous to any of the seven in the notion of what they wanted to do. Judith French had no known relatives. Judith would undoubtedly like to have somebody belong to her, Judith who had spent all her remembered life in an Orphans' Home until she came to take care of "Johnny." The seven were in a mood to match missing relatives. Anne's story had seen to that, Anne's story so lately happily consummated. Family reunions were in the air, so to speak. The fact that Anne's "aunt" had dropped down from the blue was, they saw now, only what they had expected all along. Their elders might call it a miracle, but miracles are the stuff that life is made of at fifteen. It is odd when they don't happen.

"Time's up!" The president arose majestically. "Don't all speak at once."

Nobody offered to dispute the floor with any one else. Grace giggled nervously.

"I do not know how to think," said Anne sorrowfully.

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Gay's brown eyes brightened. "No ideas to offer? Neither have I."

"Gay!"

"But what shall we do?" wailed Sally.

"I thought of something," said Helen. "It isn't very much. I was hoping the rest of you would suggest something better."

Anne's small face glowed. "I knew you would think of something."

"It's only to take the telephone book, and go through all the F's and see who the people are whose name is French."

"I thought of advertising," said Estelle. "But then I remembered we wouldn't know where to advertise and we couldn't pay for notices in papers all over the country."

"My idea," Mary remarked, "is to find out from Judith everything she can remember about the time before she went to the asylum."

"She doesn't remember anything," Grace declared.

"We've never asked her particulars. I mean things like where she used to live and what her father's full name was and her mother's name. She must know such things as those. The asylum people probably knew and they would have told Judith."

"Good head!" approved Gay. "For people who

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will insist on stirring things up instead of letting them happen along of themselves, I must say you're doing well. First on the program, interview Judith. Second, study telephone books and directories. Advertise, if we can scrape together the cash."

"But let's be sure," urged Grace, her fluffy hair quivering with the eagerness of her speech, "let's be sure, whatever we do, to find somebody who has plenty of money. Judith has had less than nothing so long it would be a shame to give her some poor relations."

"Why, Grace," Sally cried, "when you're poor or an asylum girl or something like that and you find your great-uncle, he's always rich. He just has to be."

"What would be the good of him if he weren't?" put in Mary satirically.

"Sometimes he isn't any relative at all!" cried Helen, coming abruptly out of a reverie. "Sometimes he's a friend of your father or he's the man who loved your mother when she was a girl—she didn't love him, but he always loved her and he never married. If Judith's great-uncle isn't her great-uncle at all, but is that kind of man, how shall we ever know he's the one if we see him?"

They gazed at each other appalled.

Gay rallied. "That's the kind of man who will

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just have to happen along and introduce himself, the way I said. The great-uncle we can get to work on ourselves. Hurrah! Now we're all happy."

Grace smoothed her skirt complacently.

Helen sprang to her feet.

"Where are you going?"

"To get the telephone book. Your grandfather won't mind, will he, Anne? Then we can begin now."

CHAPTER II

DEFINING A FAMILY

JUDITH, her plain features irradiated by her unquenchable smile, faced the excited group of girls in good-natured puzzlement. F. O. C. had descended upon her in the act of giving Johnny an airing and swept her off to Helen's house. Johnny was at the moment gurgling with joy over the attentions of the twins, who were only too glad of the chance to investigate his black-eyed chubbiness.

"Me?" Judith demanded. "Me a secret? Why, there ain't—I mean there isn't—anything about me worth trying to find out."

Grace took her by the arms and shook her. "Yes, there is," she asserted. "Don't say again that you're not a secret. You're *the* Secret, the great F. O. C. Secret. You're It. Now, do you understand?"

Judith's gray eyes twinkled at Grace affectionately. "Not the least bit in the world," she asserted blithely. "I guess you think you're talking to somebody else, Gracie. That's what's the matter with you."

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"It can't be the matter with all of us," said Estelle. "Now, can it?"

Judith turned on Estelle a gaze of unqualified admiration. "Say, you haven't got it, too, that secret bee!"

"We've all got it," they told her, chorusing.

Judith shook her head. "Maybe, if you say so. You can't all be crazy. But I haven't, for sure."

"You're going to get it," said Helen.

"I guess I'm slow," Judith confessed humbly.

Little Anne emerged from the group and fronted her. "Listen!" she ordered. "I will tell you. And then you must help us. You must tell us all you remember. You would like to have some people of your very own, somebody belonging to you, not just Johnny?"

"I'm a lucky girl to have a little tyke like Johnny."

"I did not ask that. I asked, would you like relatives, real relatives, your very own?"

Judith grinned cheerfully at Anne. "Would I like the moon and a star or two, and like enough a piece of the sun?"

Anne stamped her foot.

"There aren't any to have, so what's the use wishing?"

"If there were some," Anne persisted, "would you like to know about them? Would you?"

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Judith's face changed swiftly. A sudden hungriness burned up its jollity as in a flame. "Just wouldn't I?"

The others paled before that look, the hot desire of it. Only Anne stood firm.

"We are going to find them for you. The Find-Out Club is going to find out about your relatives." Perfect confidence and unwavering determination looked out of Anne's small face. She nodded her head emphatically. "If I had not come here to live with grandfather across the street from Helen, I should never have found Aunt Alice. I know it. The Find-Out Club made me its Secret. There is nothing more we can find out about me, and we have made you the Secret. Now, do you understand?"

Judith's freckles again dotted the wide expanse of her friendly smile. "Say, but that's nice of you. Don't things come my way, though! Me, a secret. Me!" She beamed on them. "Makes me laugh to think of it."

"It isn't a joke," Sally told her.

"Sure, it's no joke. I'm that proud I won't be able to walk home straight with Johnny."

"Everybody sit down," Gay commanded. "Now tell us everything you remember about the time before you went to the asylum."

Judith laughed. "That's easy. I don't re-

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member a thing, not a thing. You don't remember much that happens before you're a year and a half. I can tell you plenty about the asylum."

Gay shook her head. "That won't do us any good. Don't you know where you used to live?"

"Oh, yes, I know that. The asylum folks told me. Funny little place. Took me more'n an hour to find it on the map. Westport, Maine. That's where I was born. Makes me feel kind of cheerful every time I see that dot. Most every week I hunt it up just to say howdy do."

"The secretary will put it down," ordered the president. "Yes, Helen, that's you. Paper and pencil, please. Westport, Maine. Your father's full name, Judith."

Judith looked around on the intent faces. Importance and solemnity sat upon the brows of F. O. C. At the table the secretary-treasurer was spreading out a sheet of paper.

"You're doing this in style, aren't you?"

"You never know what facts you may need till you need 'em," Gay observed. "Ready, Helen? All right. Your father's name, Judith."

Judith sat up very straight. "Raymond Liston French."

"That's a good name!" Grace cried. "Did he have an uncle——"

"Who is conducting this examination?" The

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president scowled ferociously. "The chairman of the executive committee will please come to order and keep still. Your mother's maiden name, Judith—the one she had before she was married."

"White," said Judith promptly. "Melissa White. That's a funny kind of name, Melissa."

"I wish the other had been funny too," Mary Tracy remarked. "White is almost as common as Brown and Brown comes next to Smith."

"Oh, yes." Helen's pencil stopped moving. "If only it had been something like Fotheringay or Montmorency or Warrington or Fortescue."

"Hollingsworth would have been good," Grace put in.

"Or Inglesby," Sally cried. "I saw that name in a book yesterday."

"Well, it's White," said Estelle dispassionately. "Let's get on with Gay's questions."

"It isn't that we don't like your mother's name, Judith," Helen explained hastily. "It's only that we're thinking about how easy it will be to find Whites everywhere. There are so many of them we won't have any way to tell which might be related to you."

"We shall have to ask them whether they come from Westport, Maine."

"Ask hundreds, Anne?"

"Ask till we find out, Spud."

DEFINING A FAMILY

Gay waved them to silence.

"Did your father have any brothers, Judith?"

Judith shook her head. "The asylum folks didn't ever hear of 'em, if he had 'em."

"Any uncles?"

The room held its breath.

"Not as I know of."

"But he might have had?" Helen's voice was beseeching. "Excuse me, Gay. I mean, Judith, don't you think he might have had an uncle somewhere, like Anne's aunt, who didn't get his mail regularly and never knew his nephew was sick or anything about his having died until months, maybe years afterward—who perhaps never knew?"

"The uncle might have been in Australia!" Grace brought out the idea the minute it struck her. "I was reading about a man in the morning paper. Nobody had heard of him for twenty years and suddenly he turned up rich. He'd been in Australia and he'd never written or sent home his address and his sister thought he was dead. But there he came one day walking in her front door with his pockets full of money and a bank account a mile long. Your father might have an uncle like that, Judith,—lots of people do,—and you'd never know it till he told you."

"He'd advertise for you," Sally explained, "or

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send the family lawyer to hunt for you, the way they do in English stories about lost American heirs."

Judith beamed on them. "You've got it all planned out fine!"

"If somebody came looking for her," Grace ejaculated, "it would help a lot!"

"We can't count on it," said Estelle. "We can't count on anybody but ourselves."

"Don't you think your father might have had an uncle, Judith?" Helen persisted.

"He might, but I never heard of one."

"Or your mother?"

Judith shook her head. "The matron at the Home told me they couldn't find me any folks. They hunted when I was first put in."

"Did they look in Westport?" Anne put the question.

"They wrote to the town clerk and he told 'em there wasn't any Frenches or Whites left in Westport. Used to be a lot of 'em, he said, but some of 'em had died and some had moved away and he didn't rightly know where they'd gone. Father's and mother's folks had died. I hadn't any near kin, he wrote 'em."

Dejection settled on the room. Every word that had issued from Judith's wide merry mouth buried a hope.

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"Come now, don't take it like that! Here I've made you all feel bad." For once the pleasant grin had faded. "I wouldn't have done that for a good deal. You're the best ever, setting your hearts on finding me some folks, and ——"

"We're going to." Anne's voice was packed with determination. "Aren't we, Helen?"

The secretary-treasurer nodded like a mandarin. "We don't know just how yet, but we're going to," she echoed bravely.

"There's one satisfaction," said Mary Tracy. "We needn't send any letters to Westport, Maine."

Grace brightened. "That will save us a good deal of time, won't it?"

Estelle spoke. "The man in Westport said he didn't know where those people had gone. They may be anywhere. It seems to me that makes it easier for us. We can begin right here."

"We'd have to begin here anyway," said Sally. "We wouldn't know how to begin anywhere else."

"There's a lot of difference," declared Gay, "between beginning where you have to because you have it, and doing it because it's as good a place as the next one. You've helped us a lot, Judith. You don't think of anything else we ought to know before we start, do you?"

Judith's twinkle was back in place now in her

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steady gray eyes. "Nothing I can tell you," she said. "My, but you're great girls!"

"Wait till we've done something," suggested Mary Tracy.

"Don't get your hopes up too high," Grace put in, "if we tell you one thing right now. He's going to have plenty of money."

"Who?"

"Your great-uncle."

Helen explained. "We made him a great-uncle because we thought it would be easier to find a relation if we had somebody definite in mind."

"Also easier to talk about," said Mary. "We've talked a good deal about him so far."

"We haven't named him."

"How can we, Gay, when we don't know what his first name really is?"

"To be sure," said Gay cheerfully, "we can't. Would you like him best married or unmarried, Judith?"

Judith's glance roved from face to face. They were as sober, earnest, intent as ever. Even Gay's brown eyes, despite the whimsicality of her speech, regarded Judith inquiringly.

"I guess we're playing at fairy stories. But if you could—could rub a lamp like that boy I was reading about yesterday and get me anything I wanted ——"

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"Yes, yes," they encouraged her.

Judith drew a long breath. "I'd take a baby ——"

"Didn't I say a baby?" breathed Helen.

"A baby the size of Johnny. Black hair and black eyes. He's a pretty good pattern all through, Johnny is."

"What else?"

"Who else?"

"Now I don't know what you're talking about."

"Who else do you want in your family?" Grace explained.

"Of course we might not be able to get them all for you," Helen added hastily, "but it might help to know what you'd like."

"Can I have any more?" Judith's grin widened. "I must say you're generous. Let me see now, the baby would need a father and mother, I guess. I don't know much about fathers. Make him as good as you can. For a mother—well, Helen's is about the right sort. She looks mother all over, Mrs. Thayer does. Makes you feel as if you'd got home, to come into a room where she is."

Helen wanted to rush across the floor and hug Judith, but she refrained, lest she break the spell.

"Then there ought to be a little grandmother,

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if you're doing the thing up brown." Judith paused apologetically.

"Go on! Go on!"

"A little grandmother with white curls and a cap, sitting in a chair knitting. I've seen pictures of 'em in books. They always knit. And there's a kitten to play with the ball of yarn. Cute little spud!"

"Go on!"

"And lots of children." Judith brought out the words hungrily. "Some twins, I guess, and a little tyke just getting into knee pants, and another that isn't sure of his feet yet. A few boys with hands and feet miles too big for 'em and always getting in the way when you're looking at 'em. I like boys."

"Wouldn't you have any girls?" Mary asked.

"I wouldn't throw 'em out if they came in the bunch. But I guess I'd get on better without 'em."

"I guess you would, too," said Gay. "You and those boys would have fun, Judith."

"We'd make out to have a tolerably good time."

"Well, if I was picking out a family, I'd want some girls," Grace said positively. "Boys are noisy, dirty, disturbing creatures in the house—that age you're talking about, Judith—and you can't do a



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thing with them. Girls you can tie hair-bows on and fuss with their clothes and have fun with them generally."

"'Twouldn't be any fun for me," chuckled Judith. "Me tying hair-bows! If I find any girls in that prize package, I'll send 'em over to you, Gracie."

"I am afraid," Anne's face was troubled, "I am afraid it will be hard to find so many boys in one family."

"I know a family like that," Gay said. "Eight boys and one girl. Not here, though. And their name isn't French or White."

"Even if we found one," Mary suggested, "it might not be related to Judith."

"And it might not be rich," said Estelle.

"Would you mind very much, Judith," Helen asked, "if there weren't quite so many boys?"

"Mind!" echoed Judith. "Not me. I was just making up a story out loud, like you, Helen."

"You put in too many boys," said Gay.

"Sure, I put in too many boys. We'll take out half of 'em for luck."

Anne looked relieved. "I am sure it will be luckier not to have quite so many."

"Then that's settled," cried Grace, jumping up cheerfully. "This meeting has sat still long enough. Everybody going coasting to-night? I

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must rush home now and study, or Mr. Staples will take my head off to-morrow."

F. O. C. in general shared Grace's buoyancy. A pleasant sense of having begun to do something warmed the souls of its members. Accomplishment lay all in the future; no tiresome practical strings had as yet been tied to fancy. Subject to the dictates of prudence, they were free to imagine for Judith the exact sort of family her tastes and theirs indicated. Localizing this dream on some small fraction of the earth's surface would be a different matter, not so simple or so comfortable perhaps; they knew this in the back of their heads, but they were not thinking about it now. That they might fail, in the nature of things could not occur to them. Not even sober-minded Anne or practical Estelle or humorous keen-witted Mary Tracy, not even Gay herself dreamed that they might fail to find somebody belonging to Judith if they put their minds on it and tried very hard and were not rebuffed by discouragements. Gay, indeed, was inclined to advocate letting the discovery come of itself, but her expectation of final success was identical with that of the others. Only Judith herself took the matter sceptically. She paused by the table where Mrs. Thayer sat darning stockings.

"They're awful nice girls," Judith observed.

Mrs. Thayer smiled. "They are nice."

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Judith pulled up a low seat and dropped on it. "What do you think they've gone and done now? Planned to find me a family. Asked me what kind I'd like, they did. Wanted to know the ages of the children. Let me fit myself out with relatives enough to stock a town. Only they said maybe they wouldn't be able to get quite all of 'em to say 'Present' when the roll's called. Yes, they warned me. Anne spoke up first, that little Anne Alden. It worried her to have me choose so many boys. She thought I might not get 'em all. Didn't want me to be disappointed. I thought it was a joke at first and I played the game with the rest of 'em. I guess I ain't used enough to their sort." Judith's face was grave now, painfully sober. "Tell me, Mrs. Thayer, what'll I do? I wouldn't have those girls disappointed for anything, not for anything, and they're going to get an awful jolt. They're so dead set on finding me some folks."

"And you, Judith?"

"Me? Why, I ain't—I mean I'm not expecting anything. I haven't any folks. I guess I'd have heard of 'em before now if there'd been any to have."

Mrs. Thayer laid the stocking in her lap and gazed thoughtfully out of the window. Judith watched her eagerly.

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"Mrs. Royce's coming seems to have gone to the girls' heads," she said finally.

Judith nodded. "That's just it. They're plumb crazy."

"I think you will simply have to let them be crazy for a while, Judith. There are too many fairly sensible heads among them for the girls to take any action that is very silly, I fancy."

"That isn't what scares me. It's the jolt they're going to get in the end."

"People have to meet jolts. You know that, Judith." Mrs. Thayer's eyes were very kindly.

"But I'm used to 'em. I expect 'em, more or less, and I've got so they kind of brace me up. You do brace up to meet a jolt, you know."

"That is what the other girls must learn."

"I hate to see 'em do it, though."

"We all hate it. Some of us hate it so much that we try to smooth out all the rough places, so there shall be no jolts. I used to, years ago. Then I learned that I couldn't smooth them all out and that I shouldn't be a good mother if I tried too hard to make everything easy for my children."

"My," said Judith, "if I had a mother like you I'd think I was living in heaven, walking round on golden streets! There wouldn't be any jolts then."

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Mrs. Thayer smiled at the girl. "You would find a few, Judith. Helen does. Enough to make her amount to something, I hope, when she grows up."

"Then you think, Mrs. Thayer, I've just got to sit tight and watch 'em?"

"I think if there is disappointment in store for the girls, they must meet it. You know the world better than they do, Judith. On the whole, what do you think of it?"

"I like it," said Judith. "It's great to be alive and to find out things. There's such a lot of folks, and they're all different. First rate, too. Yes, I like it."

Mrs. Thayer leaned over and kissed her softly. "Come in as often as you can, Judith. It is a pleasure to have you."

Dizzy with happiness, Judith drew Johnny home. "She kissed me! Helen's mother kissed me!" Over and over the words said themselves in her heart. Bewildered, beatified, the girl found her way automatically through the familiar streets.

"My, Johnny," so she addressed the baby on his own door-step, "don't everything just come my way, though!"

CHAPTER III

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THE hill was gay with coasters. Between the two lines of sturdily climbing houses long dark streaks fled down like the wind. Here and there a house, two or three it might be, was missing. The gaps showed glitteringly white under the moon. Shouts and laughter enwrapped the hill; deep rough boy voices, high sweetly shrill notes of girls. Groups toiling upward paused to watch heavily loaded double runners skimming down, to yell approval and greeting to the coasters, to bandy jokes with fellow toilers. Little boys with small sleds dodged about, looking for a chance to cast themselves down when no double rippers were following close at hand. Big boys lorded it over the course, shouting to the small fry to get out of the way. Where cross streets intersected the hill, scouts waited to give warning of approaching teams. And under all, yet faintly dominant, sounded the hum of steel as the runners skimmed over the snow.

Helen, coming out with Harry Dolan at the top of the hill, felt the skip getting into her toes.

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"Oh, Harry, let's wait just one minute," she cried, "and watch them."

He loitered obediently. "What's the matter with getting into the procession?"

She teetered up and down excitedly. "When we get in, I won't want ever to get out. And before we get in we can see what fun they're all having."

"We can see that fast enough while we're coasting."

"No, we can't. We'll be having so much fun ourselves we can't stop to notice it."

Harry grinned at her. "You're a queer girl, Helen."

"I'm not queer."

"Yes, you are. You're always saying queer things."

"What I said is true," she retorted. "You wait and see."

Then Anne and George Gray caught up with them, flanked by Sally Rollins and Jim Canney, Grace Howe and Philip Knowles, and the eight swept on to the starting-point. The four boys were partners in the best double-ripper on the hill, a fact which did not detract in the least from the girls' enjoyment. It was pleasant to hear the admiring comments that rose on all sides as the sled was brought into position. It was a new one and

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had been tried out only that afternoon. "She's a daisy," Harry had confided to Helen when he bespoke her company. The "daisy's" appearance had, it was evident, been awaited with some impatience by the knowing. Other groups good-naturedly hung back and gave Harry's party the right of way. Plainly there was a good deal of curiosity as to how "she could go."

Helen felt very conspicuous and a little shy at the center of so much interest. She wished that she had had something very festive to wear, like Grace, for instance. Grace in an orange and white hood, with a muffler to match, looked as trim and elegant and sporty as the double-ripper itself. Then Helen reflected that, after all, it was the sled everybody was interested in and not the clothes of the girls who rode on it. The thought helped her to take the place Harry indicated without undue awkwardness.

"Hold tight," he ordered.

"All right," came back the word. "Ready!"

"Let her go!"

Harry flung himself on behind Helen.

The crowded ranks of watchers on either side began to move gently; one by one faces slipped by. The runners dipped into the grade; the faces mixed, mingled, blurred to a confused streak. From somewhere in the rear a cheer rose, and on

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its sharp bark Helen slid off the earth. This was flying, sheer flying, the wind in her face, shutting her eyes, whistling in her ears. She clove the wind as a swimmer breasts the sea; it divided and fled away behind her with its high clear singing. She lost count of time, of space, of things before and things behind. She was flying, flying faster, flying till there was no fast or faster—till she seemed to swing stationary in space and all the universe roared past her with the speed of light.

Slowly, awkwardly enough, benumbed and a little dazed, she came back to earth. The air was still, painfully still, around her. From very far away a thin sound cut the silence. Figures shot up like jumping-jacks in front of her.

Grace, shaking out her skirts, was talking as usual. "Haven't we broken the record, Phil? Look how far we've come! They're cheering up on the hill. I must say it doesn't sound very loud down here. Helen, aren't you going to get up *to-night*?"

Helen rose unsteadily to her feet. It seemed to be the thing to do.

"Like it?" asked Harry.

"It was—wonderful. I thought I was flying."

"We were going some," said Phil Knowles.

"How fast were we going?" Anne asked.

"Forty miles an hour, part of the time."

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Anne turned and looked up the way they had come. "Let us go back and do it again."

George Gray nodded approval. "You're game."

The boys drawing the double-runner, the girls chattering like magpies, they toiled slowly up the hill they had descended so swiftly. Now and then they paused to watch coasters whizzing past, to peer downward and see where they stopped.

"Nobody can beat us," Grace exulted.

"I could keep it up forever," said Sally. "Doesn't it make you feel like a bird, Anne, to go swooping down this splendid hill?"

"If that is the way a bird feels, I think I should like to be one sometimes," Anne answered quaintly.

"Well, I'd like to be one right now and fly up as easily as I flew down," cried Grace. "The only trouble with sliding down-hill is walking back afterward."

"And the farther you go, the longer your walk is," Helen added. "But I don't mind walking, it's so different. Only until just now something has been the matter with my legs. I couldn't seem to make them go right."

"Stiff?" Harry grinned.

"A little."

"It's like when you ride a long while," said Sally. "You feel like keeping on just the way you were."

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"What are you talking about?" Grace's voice was peremptory. "We weren't long going down that hill."

"No, but it was a long way to go."

A general laugh rose at Helen's words.

"I speak for the front seat this time," said Sally. "The one behind the steersman."

"That's fair enough," agreed Grace. "We'll all take turns."

"I wish I could steer!" Helen said the words so low that only Harry Dolan caught them.

"We'll come out here some afternoon when there isn't such a crowd, and I'll teach you."

"Oh, will you?"

"Sure. It isn't so much of a trick, after all."

"I'd like," Helen explained, "to see how it would feel to whiz down that hill with nobody in front of me, nothing but air and snow. I think I'd feel more like a bird than ever."

"I don't see," Grace's voice was chirping, "how you boys keep your eyes open. I shut mine tight the minute we got fairly going. I couldn't help it."

"I did not," said Anne. "I thought I might miss something."

"Oh, hurry up, hurry up!" Sally adjured them. "Don't be such slow-pokes. Hurry up and let's do it again."

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They did it again, and again, and again, until their brains were dizzy with shooting through space and their legs were weary with toiling uphill. But their spirits continued to go zestfully. The moon climbed higher and higher and the crowd gradually grew thinner and thinner until when the best coasting of the evening had arrived, the girls announced it must be time to go home.

"Mother said ten o'clock," Helen remarked. "Isn't it nearly that?"

Jim Canney pulled out his watch. "Half-past."

"Oh, my goodness!" said Helen.

"Just once more," teased the boys.

Grace shook her head positively. "We'd never want to stop, no matter what time it was. Besides, my mother said ten o'clock too. But we'll come again if you ask us."

"It is queer," meditated Anne, as they turned from the enticing hill, "how much quicker ten o'clock comes some nights than other nights."

"Shows what kind of time we've had." Sally tugged at the muffler that had knotted itself inexplicably at the back of her neck. "What's wrong with this thing, Grace?"

Grace lent a hand with the muffler and added a stage whisper. "Your hair's coming down."

"Good reason why. All my hairpins have shelled out. I can feel one of 'em squirming down

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my back now." Hastily sweeping up the escaping locks in one hand, Sally thrust them under her gray cap, pulling it down further over her ears.

Immaculate Grace, almost as tidy now as at the beginning of the evening, proffered a couple of pins.

"No, thanks. I'd only lose 'em if I took 'em. Besides, what's the dif? It's dark, and I'm going home."

Helen, contentedly walking beside Harry Dolan, came back at the end of the evening to the subject that in these days was seldom long absent from her thoughts. She wondered whether Judith had ever coasted down-hill in her life. Did people coast who were brought up in asylums? Even now it would not be too late for the experience, could Judith only find her "folks." Johnny's mother liked to have Judith in the house as much as possible evenings. Johnny's mother seemed to be herself a person who went out a good deal. The combination appeared to preclude coasting, for the present at least, even if the boys had cared to ask Judith. Boys were queer, Helen reflected. She could not imagine one of them asking Judith to go coasting, outside that big family of boys Judith had been talking about this afternoon. They would want to take her all the time; she would be another boy to them and would go along

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as a matter of course. Yet the boys, Harry and George and Jim, liked Judith; not in the same way that they liked Grace and Sally and Estelle, but they liked her. Everybody, even Mr. Staples, liked Judith. At the end of her happy evening Helen felt more strongly than ever that Judith's "folks" must be found.

"Do you know of any people in town named French, Harry?" she asked.

"French? Never heard of 'em."

"There aren't any Frenches in the telephone book or in the directory," she explained. "I just wondered whether there might be some who had moved here very lately or whose name had been left out, or something like that. They put everybody in the directory, don't they?"

"Try to, I suppose," said Harry. "What do you want to know for?"

"It isn't the commonest kind of name. I thought—oh, I thought it would be interesting to find out."

"I wonder what you girls have got up your sleeves now. I heard Grace asking Knowles that very same thing to-night."

"Did she? We—we were talking about it the other day. About names, I mean. French is a little bit unusual, more so than White, for instance."

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Harry chuckled. "When Phil couldn't lay claim to personal acquaintance with anybody named French, Grace tackled him on White. Did he know where Jack White used to live before he lived here? Where did his people come from? Knowles told her it might have been Patagonia for all he cared. She stuck to it and quizzed him on every White in town, I guess, before she let up. I heard 'em going it for quite a while. Say, Helen, what do you want to know for?"

"Can't people like to know things without having reasons?"

"Not your bunch. It's fair enough to swap."

"Swap what? You haven't told me anything yet."

"I've backed up the directory. That ought to be worth something."

Helen shook her head.

"I'll bet you —— Hello, I do know something! Forgot all about it. Bet Knowles did, too."

"Do you mean you have thought of a family named French?"

Harry chuckled. "Not a family exactly."

"Tell me."

"What'll you tell me?"

"Oh, Harry, please don't bargain."

"A fellow wants to get something out of his information."

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"But I—I can't tell you anything yet, and I do want to know dreadfully."

"F. O. C. mixed up in it?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Well, there's an old fellow named French, queer kind of codger, I guess, lives just across the town line in Maywood. You know that big house set back among a lot of trees on the right side of the road after you pass Kirk's spring? That's it."

"The place with the stone wall and lions at the gate?"

"Lions, are they? I took 'em for dogs."

"I didn't know anybody lived there."

"This old chap does. He's a hermit."

"Honestly—a *hermit*?"

"Sure thing. I'm not stuffing you. Father told me his name once when we were out Maywood way. Father sold the fellow the place twenty years ago. It had been put in his hands to sell, you understand. From the day the man moved in he's never been off the place, Dad says. He has some kind of arrangement with one of the grocery stores to keep him in stuff to eat. Never uses meat. All the work that's done about the place he does himself. Grass grows knee high from the road to the pillars of the front porch. Some of us fellows sneaked in one night to see

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what we could see. It wasn't much. Old French goes to bed with the chickens, father says, and gets up with the sun. He's been shut up so long in that house most folks have forgotten he's there."

"Doesn't he keep any servants?"

"Not a one. Something soured him on the world and he slammed the door in its face. That's Dad's version. Made quite a stir when he first came, they say. People used to drive out that road just to see the place. They never saw anything more."

"He must have money," breathed Helen.

"Sure. Oodles of it, hidden in his bedstead or in a hole in the floor."

"Perhaps it's in the bank."

"Have it anywhere you like. The postman goes by, but never stops. There's a broken-topped box inside the front gate. For checks, most likely," Harry laughed.

"Hermits always have money. Doesn't your father think so?"

"He discounted my bedstead theory, but said the old fellow had cash enough. Paid cash down for his house."

Helen's eyes were shining in the moonlight.

"Oh, Harry, I can't ever thank you enough for telling me."

"You might let me in on the inside track."

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"I will, just as soon as I can. As soon as we're sure of anything."

"My, but you're mysterious!"

"You have to be sometimes. I've had a lovely time. Thank you again for—you know what."

From her own threshold Helen watched the door across the street open and shut, watched Harry and George swing back up the street. She had not dared even to hint to Anne of the great discovery, lest George overhear and question. Harry she felt sure of; George's discretion was as yet untried. "And boys can gossip worse than any girls when they get started," she soliloquized. "But how shall I ever wait all night to tell Anne?"

Then her mother opened the door and Helen was in the house, words fairly tripping each other to fall off her tongue. "We didn't mean to be late, mother. The clock played a trick on us and it was half-past ten before we knew it. Oh, I've had such a good time! I don't believe I ever had a better time in my life, and what do you think? I've got a clue to Judith's relatives. I truly have. I'm sure it can't be wrong. Harry told me. It's a clue to only one relative, but that's better than none. And he's rich, stupendously rich. Oh, mother, I'm so excited! But I didn't get a chance to tell Anne. I ——"

"Nell, *dear*!" Mrs. Thayer's hand fell softly on

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her daughter's arm. "You won't sleep a wink to-night if you go on like this."

"Oh, I know it. But I shan't sleep anyway. I feel all stirred up inside. And the ideas keep going round and round in my head after what Harry told me. Oh, mother, it's just like a story-book!"

"Suppose you tell me to-morrow."

Helen sighed. "You're terribly sensible, mother. You want me to go to sleep and wake up fresh and ready for school." She made a funny little grimace.

Her mother laughed. "I certainly do, Nell. You see I have known you, little daughter, for several years."

"And you think, if I don't talk about it to-night, I shall stop thinking about it and go to sleep. But I shan't."

"Try it and see."

"Oh, I'll try it, but I'm crazy to tell you right now."

Helen did go to sleep. Her lungs were so full of fresh air and her muscles so weary with exercise that in the middle of wondering how she should ever manage to lie still through the long night, a curtain descended abruptly upon her thoughts and presto! the night was gone. It is very surprising how such things happen.

Anne was as excited as Helen, when Helen told

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her. When they both proceeded to tell the rest of F. O. C., the whole seven acted like a company of grasshoppers on a gridiron. After the jumping and exclaiming and embracing had relieved the first fizz of spirits, nobody showed surprise. The truth, of course, was that nobody was surprised. It was only to be expected, when F. O. C. really took a thing in hand, that something should happen. The surprising event would have been if it hadn't happened.

"Finding relatives is really very easy," Grace observed complacently.

"We must make sure he is the right one," Gay interjected cautiously.

"Oh, of course," said Grace.

"I am afraid Judith will be disappointed about the baby," suggested Anne.

"And the boys," Estelle added.

"There may be some boys." Helen was always ready with a suggestion. "Perhaps a baby, too. He may have a sister somewhere who has a big family. A sister or a brother, perhaps more than one. Hermits often do."

"Oh, yes," said Grace. "And when he finds out all about Judith he will stop being a hermit. Judith will go to live with him in that big house. I don't believe it would be a bit bad looking if it was painted and the grass cut."

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"It's rather far away," Sally began.

"I expect he will give her an automobile, a little car she can run herself."

"Grace!"

"Why not? His money must have been just piling up these years, he has used it so little."

"But it can't have piled up, Gracie, if he keeps it in his mattress."

"Pooh, Gay! People don't do that kind of thing much in these days of banks, not even hermits."

"You read in the papers about their doing it."

"Our hermit isn't that sort."

"Well, first," said Estelle practically, "we've got to find out whether he really is our hermit. I mean, whether he is related to Judith at all."

"He's ours, fast enough," Grace asserted glibly. "He bought the house twenty years ago, didn't he?"

"We don't know one single thing about him," Mary Tracy objected. "We only imagine he is related to Judith."

"But it all fits, Spud. Don't you see how it fits?" Helen cried.

"What we want to know," Gay declared, "is whether he hails from Westport, Maine."

"Or any of his people," Estelle added.

"Righto! Now how are we going to find out?"

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The girls looked at each other thoughtfully. Anne broke the silence.

"We must ask him."

"By mail, Anne?"

"He—he might not answer us by mail."

"You're right there," Grace cried. "He might not pay any attention to a letter, even if there is a broken down old mail-box inside his gate."

"Goodness," Sally exclaimed, "you don't mean, Anne, that we shall have to go and see him ourselves!"

"I think some of us ought to go. Is there any other way?"

Into six pairs of eyes entered startled wonder. Here and there wonder changed to reluctant anticipation, to fearful eagerness. F. O. C. sat in awed silence before the daring of Anne's proposition.

"Shall we take Judith?" questioned Sally at last.

"No." Gay's command was firm. "We won't take Judith and we won't tell her anything about this hermit till we're sure. Neither will we tell any one else."

"Nobody?" gasped Helen. "Not even our mothers?"

"Not even our mothers. A story might get out, and you know how stories spread. It isn't fair to tell a soul till we know what we're talking about."

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"Then somebody go quick!" Grace cried. "I can't see Judith every day in school and not boil over soon."

"Who would dare to go?" Estelle queried. "I'd be scared to death."

"It isn't a question of who dares," Gay declared. "It's a question of who will have the most weight with the hermit. We can't expect him to jump at the thought of finding a new relative now, when for twenty years he has tried to keep away from his old ones."

"He ought to jump at the idea," Grace declared. "My goodness, think of living all sole alone for twenty years!"

"And think of all Judith is going to do for him," Sally added. "He ought to go down on his knees and thank us for telling him about her, but I suppose he won't."

"They never do that till afterward," Gay reminded her.

"I hope Judith will like him," Mary said dubiously.

"How do you suppose he looks?" Estelle queried.

"Hairy," said Gay promptly, "like John the Baptist, with his locusts and wild honey. Long hair and a beard reaching down to his boots."

"Gay!"

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"To his waist anyhow. Hermits never are tidy."

"Do you think we would really better go on with him if he's like that?"

"Why not, Estelle?"

"Would you like to have a relative like that, Gay?"

"Can't say I'd welcome him with open arms."

"Well, then. What about Judith?"

"Oh, he'll change," two or three eager voices informed Estelle. "They always do. Judith is all he needs to change him."

"Haven't you read anything in your life, Stella?" Gay demanded severely. "The minute he sets his eyes on Judith and understands she is his favorite nephew's orphaned daughter, he'll run for a razor. Enter, a reformed character."

"Finding Judith is going to do him almost as much good as it does Judith, isn't it?" observed Helen.

"I'm not interested in doing him good," Estelle announced.

"Well, *I* think it would be grand," Grace countered. "Poor man! He must be terribly lonely."

"He wants to be lonely, doesn't he?"

"What if he does, Stella? It isn't good for him."

"Just the same," said Estelle, "I think, if he

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doesn't turn out well, that Judith ought not to be obliged to have him for an uncle."

"Time enough to bother about that," Gay interposed briskly, "when he hasn't reformed. I expect he'll make a perfectly glorious relative. He is going to be so crazy over Judith he'll lie awake nights thinking up nice things to do for her. The point is, who's going to tell him about her?"

"Why don't we all go?"

"Seven is too many, Grace."

"Don't send anybody alone," Mary begged. "Two won't be half so scared as one."

"Pooh!" said Grace, "you talk as though he was going to bite our heads off. Now I don't believe he'd do anything of the sort."

"He may be a little awkward, just at first," Sally suggested. "It's so long since he has talked with people."

"Somebody must go who will put him at his ease," Grace asserted.

"That lets me out."

"I don't know about that, Sally," Mary remarked, "but I think Estelle ought to be one of the two. Nobody could look at Estelle without giving her everything she asked for."

"I? Oh, I couldn't!"

"Why couldn't you?"

"I'd be too scared to open my mouth."

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"You mean you think you'd be."

"I know so, Mary."

"But that's nonsense. You ——"

"Gracie wouldn't run out of language," interposed Gay. "All in favor of Grace and Estelle as F. O. C.'s representatives ——"

"I won't go one step, Gay, without the rest of you."

"Why not all go together as far as the spring?"

"Good idea, Helen." The president waved a rising murmur to silence. "F. O. C. will proceed in a body to Kirk's spring. From that point the skirmish line—to wit, Miss Howe and Miss Lawrence—will advance upon the enemy."

"You will have to come too, Gay," declared Estelle, "or I won't go one step further than Kirk's spring."

"All right. I don't mind. In fact, I'd have rather hated to miss being in at the death."

A delicious thrill of adventure prickled the girls' spines.

"When?" demanded two or three voices. "When are we going?"

"The first pleasant day," decreed the presiding general.

"Oh, I know. On snow-shoes."

"That depends, Spud, on the weather."

"If we don't go soon," Estelle said, her tone

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matching her face for once, "I shall die of fright before we get started."

"Who's afraid?" chattered Grace. "I think it's going to be awfully thrilling."

Gay laid her finger on her lips. "Not a word. Not a word to a living soul until the hermit is unmasked."

CHAPTER IV

BEARDING THE LIONS

THREE nights F. O. C. went to bed wondering, Will it be to-morrow? Three mornings they rose, questioning, Is it to-day? For three days a tense absent-minded expectancy possessed them. Wherever two or three were to be seen in company, their heads were laid close together and tongues wagged mightily. Whenever a girl not of the mystic seven approached one of these small groups, whenever Judith herself approached, the brisk tongues fell strangely silent or faltered into awkward generalities.

Some time or other during the three days each of the seven took Judith apart and spoke mysteriously. "We can't tell you just yet what we are talking about, but oh, Judith!" Here an ecstatic pause. "Oh, Judith, it's coming out beautifully—you know what! If we shouldn't be able to manage the boys, just at first, you wouldn't mind terribly, would you?"

Judith assured each one that she wouldn't mind a bit. If they thought things were lovely, she guessed they must be.

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"And we'll tell you the very first minute we can." Thus confidences always ended.

"I wonder," mused Judith, "what those girls have got in their heads now!" and went on her busy daily round with less perturbation than her fellow members of F. O. C. would have thought desirable, had they known it.

"Judith's fairly jumping out of her skin with curiosity," Grace confided to Estelle. "I hope the weather will clear soon so we can have something to tell her."

"I don't," Estelle returned gloomily. "I wish it would snow forever."

"Oh, cheer up. What's going to hurt you?"

"That's the worst of it. I don't know. If I knew, I might not be so scared."

Grace bore herself jauntily. The excitement and responsibility agreed with her. Grace's tongue flew even faster than usual. She felt herself one of those singled out to confer a great boon on two unfortunate people and her importance swelled visibly. That in the process of doing good she was to see the inside of a mystery which had once piqued the whole countryside did not lessen her sense of virtue. If you could do good and have an exhilarating time doing it, all the better for you.

Gay appeared much as usual, though traces of an inward intoxication flashed now and then

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through her coolly casual manner. She poked fun at herself, Grace, and Estelle indiscriminately. Her references to the immortal three hundred, to Horatius's gory stand, and Nathan Hale's heroic fate, worried Estelle, bewildered Grace, and uplifted the others. It is hard not to feel like heroes when you are about to do something which you think is at once daring, dangerous, and benevolent.

A day-long snow-storm passed into a day's thaw which in turn changed again to snow that ended in a sleety rain. The fourth day dawned on a world sheathed in diamonds. Every tree had its shining coat of mail; every shrub's tiniest twig glittered gloriously. Telephone wires were ropes of iridescent light. Posts stood out like blocks hewn from the quarries of one richer than Midas. Moreover, wonder of wonders, it was Saturday.

Gay's order sped over the wire early. "This afternoon—at one o'clock. A walk to Kirk's spring on the crust."

Even though F. O. C. had been expecting some such word for three interminable days, hearts popped into throats. It is one thing to say, "Tomorrow;" it is quite another to have an event bring you up short with, "To-day."

Estelle telephoned Mary, "I don't believe I'll be able to go. I feel awfully queer."

"Where?" Mary threw back over the wire.

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"In my chest. Isn't that where you have pneumonia?"

"Funk," Mary informed her. "There's nothing the matter with you but pure funk. Don't desert Mr. Micawber."

Estelle came, a little pale, openly nervous, but more dolorously lovely than ever.

The seven gathered at Gay's house. Grace, as usual, had dressed for the part. She arrived with Sally, whose costume she was engaged, also as usual, in reorganizing on the way. Helen and Anne skipped along in company, each thrilled to the heart of her with the importance of the afternoon's purpose. Mary walked, but not even Mary could keep the faintest hint of exaltation from her step.

"Morituri salutamus." So Gay, with an arm around Grace and Estelle, greeted her.

"Don't, Gay," breathed Estelle.

"If you are inclined to faint-heartedness, my child," Gay spun Grace into the center of the floor, "regard your fellow-representative. Ever know Gracie had so many hats?"

"This isn't a new hat. It's an old one trimmed over. I trimmed it especially for Mr. French."

"Mr. French!" Gay rolled up her eyes. "We'd better practice that. How did you do it? The especially part of the hat, I mean."

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"I said, 'That man has not seen a girl's hat for twenty years.' Then I sat down and thought out what kind of girl's hat he would like best to see after those twenty years."

"It's queer, but I like it." Helen walked around Grace, inspecting the hat.

"It's the prettiest hat you ever had on," Mary approved.

"You're a genius," Gay assented. "On hats. As everybody is here now, we'd better start."

Mary patted Estelle's arm. "Lead on, Macduff!"

The seven threaded the streets briskly. At the outskirts of town Gay turned from the road.

"Now for the crust!"

Glittering white fields, broadly checkered with dark lines of fence, ran up hill and down before the girls. Sally scampered a few yards and stamped her heels hard. Not even a dent showed on the icy surface. With a little whoop she ran on. The rest followed, scattering right and left.

"Isn't this better than snow-shoes?" Gay cried.

For a minute they forgot their purpose, forgot whither those shining fields would lead them. Only Estelle the fearful and Anne the pertinacious remembered. With gay shouts the others slid hither and thither over the snow.

"What an afternoon for coasting!"

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"If we weren't going to see the hermit ——"

Then they all remembered.

"Come on! Come on! It's just as good sliding in his direction as all over the place," Sally cried. Sally was not to be of the skirmish line, and the fact spoke for itself in her voice.

Running and sliding on light feet, storming the glittering swells, dipping swiftly into purple-shadowed hollows, the seven advanced.

Suddenly Estelle stopped. "I'm going home."

Gay caught her arm. "I would if I darst, but I darsn't," she whispered.

"You, Gay?"

The president of F. O. C. nodded. "I don't exactly hanker for our job. And the further I go, the less I hanker."

The two girls eyed each other.

"Let's both go home."

"'Twon't do, Stella."

"But Gay, I can't make my feet go. They—they won't do it."

"Come as far as the spring, anyhow."

They started on, Gay almost pulling Estelle. The line had suddenly fallen silent. Nobody shouted. Nobody ran ahead with a little squeal of happiness to get a long start for a slide. Feet dragged. Helen and Anne were first at the gap in the fence across the road from Kirk's spring.

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They waited for the others to catch up with them. Soberly the seven trailed into the road, Gay in the lead.

"Let's get a drink," said Grace.

They broke the ice that spanned the trickling water and in silence each quenched her thirst.

"I want another," Grace remarked.

The six watched her without speaking. Grace used plenty of time. She must have been very thirsty.

"I think," Gay said, "we would better rest a few minutes. It was rather too long a walk across those fields."

"I think so too," said Grace.

The seven sat down on the crust near the spring and each of the seven drew a long breath. Several of them drew more than one. Whether she belonged to the skirmish line or not, each girl found her breathing apparatus not quite in its ordinary working order.

"I see a chimney," remarked Helen.

"It's farther from the road than I thought," Sally said nervously.

Silence.

The silence grew and deepened, widened and heightened, until it blotted out the whole beautiful sun-bathed winter day. Suddenly a giggle shattered it, a monstrous uncanny sound. Every

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girl jumped, and Grace choked on her own unhappy mirth.

"Does anybody want to see a hermit?" Gay intoned the words after industriously beating Grace's back.

"No!" Estelle and Grace spoke together.

"Neither do I," said Gay.

The other four gaped at them with wide open mouths and eyes.

"Aren't you—going—on?"

"I'm scared," said Gay. "I shouldn't have any breath left to speak to a hermit, if I saw one."

"But your hat, Grace!" cried Helen idiotically.

"Is anything wrong with it?"

"You made it for—for him."

"I'll keep it for myself."

"At least," Mary said after a while, "let's walk past the place."

Gay jumped up. "I'd just as soon walk past. In fact, I'd rather."

"I'll wait for you here," said Estelle.

But she didn't. The six had scarcely moved three rods from the spring when Estelle caught up with them. "Too lonely," was all the explanation she vouchsafed.

On tiptoe they stole forward. When they spoke, they whispered, but for the most part nobody spoke. The world lay perfectly still around them.

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Like the girls, the earth seemed to hold its breath. Under the shadow of dark pines little trees stretched silver arms; beyond them a tangle of wild grape-vines hung in full sun, an ice curtain that sparkled gloriously. The curtain fell almost to the snowy backs of two crouching creatures that guarded a break in the stone wall.

"They *are* lions," Helen whispered, and jumped at the sound of her own voice.

"The gate is gone," breathed Sally.

A field of glimmering white swept upward from the wall and the crouching lions toward a house. It seemed to shrink away from the girls' eyes, as though to hide its dinginess behind the leafless trees that interposed icy branches between it and passers-by. Yet it was not a small house. Tall pillars rose nobly to a perfectly proportioned pediment. The windows were wide and stately. A door with fan lights gave on a terrace raised above the slope by a low retaining wall.

As the seven peered fearfully they began to see more than the outlines. They saw ruin and shame and desolation. The windows were broken; empty sockets of glass stared out at the road. The fan lights revealed ragged gashes. In two or three places the retaining wall poured a cascade of stones down the hill. Blinds were missing or hung rakishly by a single hinge. The whole place wore

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an unkempt deserted air. It looked as though no one had lived there for a dozen years.

Grace pointed timorously. "What—what are those?"

"I have been trying to make out," Mary whispered.

Instinctively the girls had drawn together. They gripped hands as they stood. Although they were not cold, they shivered. Their eyes traveled from one to another of the strange shapes that broke the rise of the white slope, bizarre exotic shapes.

Suddenly Gay snorted. "Animals! Animals! Like the lions."

Gazing with enlightened understanding, they perceived. Under the gaunt limbs of an oak an elephant trumpeted with uplifted trunk. Out of a birch grove emerged an antlered deer. A giraffe nosed the branches of a maple. A bear reared itself on its hind legs beneath an elm.

"Hurry up! Let's go home."

"They're iron, Gracie. They can't eat you."

"I don't like 'em. Please, Gay, come home."

"Why haven't we ever seen them before?" Estelle queried.

"You can't see much of anything in summer when the leaves are out on that vine," Gay told her.

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"They look too real to suit me." Sally's teeth chattered. "I say, too, let's go home."

"See the snow on their backs. They're frozen down tight."

"Don't be funny, Spud." Grace's voice wavered and went out.

A puff of wind whipped the valley. It struck together the ice-sheathed branches with a sharp clashing. Overhead, all around, like steel on steel, the sound grew and dwindled.

Grace threw her arms about Sally's neck. "Quick! Run! He's after us."

Panic-stricken, F. O. C. fled up the road.

The seven stopped in the course of minutes and reconnoitered.

"I don't see him," Mary said. "He's gone back."

"What did he look like?" Helen asked.

"Never mind that now," Gay interposed. "What I want to know is, why did you choose this way to run, Gracie?"

"This way?"

"Yes. Why didn't you run toward home, if you were going to run?"

"I did. Of course I did."

Surprised, the girls gazed about them. Grace dropped to the snow. "Oh, my goodness! what have we done? I never can walk past that house again, never."

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Thoughtfully Mary considered Grace's disconsolate figure. "Did you really see anybody?"

"Don't go talking to me like that, Spud Tracy! You heard it. You all heard it."

"Oh, that!" Gay cried. "Was that all you made such a fuss over? That was the wind."

"The wind!"

"Here it goes again."

The metallic clashing sounded and died once more.

Gay started boldly down the road. "Come on, lunatics."

Bunching a little, they followed their leader. Gay set a good pace and F. O. C. held to it briskly. Nobody cared to be left behind.

Almost opposite the guarding lions Anne's voice challenged the stillness. "Isn't any one going in?"

Gay swung around sharply and the company halted in disorder.

"No," Grace said crossly. "Of course not. What are you stopping for, Gay?"

"I think," Anne was monotonous, "I think some one ought to go in."

"Well, *I* don't," Sally cried. "I think we were fools to talk of it. For goodness' sake, don't stop here!"

Anne's eyes traveled from one face to another and came to rest on Helen's.

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"I shall go in," she announced. "We came to go in."

Helen spoke without giving herself time to think. She did not want to think.

"I will go with you, Anne."

Anne put out her hand, and without another word the two advanced on the lions. Behind them, a confusion of voices, babbling commands and entreaties; before them, the sweep of shining crust, broken by tree trunks, strange animal shapes, and the desolate house. Helen and Anne climbed steadily, never once looking back. Helen's feet felt like lumps of ice, her tongue lumbered her dry mouth. She had no sense now of heroic action, only fear, hideous fear. But she could not let Anne go alone.

At the elephant Gay caught up with them. "Morituri salutamus!" Gay said to the elephant.

"Don't!" Helen managed to enunciate.

But Gay had found her voice and liked the sound of it. "I shall talk," she announced. "I shall talk and we'll all feel better. I feel better already. Stage fright. Pure stage fright. There's nothing to be worried about in calling on a hermit. Interesting human experience. You're a brick, Anne, a double row of A No. 1 bricks. Hello, here's the nimble gazelle! If I weren't about to call on a hermit, I'd take a ride on your back, sir.

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Whew, but the place looks rotten. I don't quite like dragging Judith into this, but —— Shall we ring the front door-bell? I'll break my leg in a hole in the porch, most likely."

"I do not think he lives in the front of the house," Anne said. Her hand held Helen's very tightly.

"Wow!" A bush tinkled its icy arms and Gay veered away from it. "You startled me!" She addressed the bush severely.

Helen was too much frightened to speak. Her vivid imagination conjured before her mind's eye a procession of terrors. That sane reflection would have told her it was impossible to meet them all in the flesh did not matter. Helen was beyond sane reflection. She could only put one foot in front of the other and cling to Anne. Gay's voice comforted a little. That irrepressible rivulet of speech ran on and on, it seemed to Helen, like Lord Tennyson's brook, forever. Later, thinking it all over, she understood what people meant when they spoke of crowding a lifetime into a minute.

Helen felt old and gray and hoary when they reached the ell of the house. It did not occur to her to turn back for the simple reason that no ideas whatever occurred to her, except the original idea with which she was furnished when she took

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Anne's hand at the broken-down gate. She would go with Anne.

The corner of the house was before them. Beyond—who knew? No human footstep had left its trace on that wide expanse of dazzling snow behind them. The house had as yet given no human sign. The silence was broken only by the silver clashings of trees and bushes, by the footfalls of the girls on the hard crust.

They rounded the corner of the house and found themselves facing a shrubbery tunnel arched with diamonds. At the entrance a snowy backed iron dog, ice bound, like everything else, fronted them belligerently. Behind the dog a cascade of ice-coated monkeys swung down from branch to branch of the tall bushes.

Helen jumped. Anne wavered, but gave back not an inch. "Jee-rusalem!" muttered Gay.

Deliberately, her small face set as though carved in granite, Anne walked into the tunnel. Helen pressed in after her and Gay brought up the rear. The path wound for several yards through what might have been an ice cave, so closely the thick stems sprang aloft. Below their interlacing twigs twilight had fallen. Through it the three moved cautiously. A sudden turn dazzled them with brilliant sunshine. The shadowed walk opened out into a wide space sloping from the south of the

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ell to an evergreen hedge. On the north rose a higher wall of green. Masses of low evergreens and of red berried bushes spread here and there; slender columns of fir and cedar spired at regular intervals. Through the low bushes and among the columnar trees ran carefully shoveled paths. On one of these a man was walking.

He was a little man, a dapper little man, though his clothes were not exactly like the clothes of any men the three startled girls had ever seen. Helen thought she remembered costumes that resembled his pictured in old magazines at home. She was trying to think in which story he had appeared as an illustration when the little man reached the end of the path he was traversing, whipped off the hat he wore, and began to mop his head violently with a white handkerchief. That head, the girls saw at a glance, was pinkly and completely bald. Wheeling abruptly and jamming the hat down again above a clean-shaven face, he started back along another path, swinging his stick.

Anne, still holding Helen's hand, stepped out of the alley. Gay followed. The little man's eyes fell upon the three girls. For a minute he stood petrified. Then his thin figure appeared to swell and bristle. The stick flew round and round in his hand so rapidly it looked to the frightened girls like a hoop revolving in the air. He opened

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his mouth and a sound issued, a sound so prodigious, so out of proportion to his size, that even Anne jumped when she heard it. The sound bellowed through the garden, reverberated from the house wall, and rolled away down the slope. The four girls who waited nervously in the road below caught the echo of it and fled for their lives toward home.

“Go away!” roared the little man as one of his own lions might have thundered. “Go away! What do you want here? Go away, I say!”

CHAPTER V

A STAND AND A RETREAT

THE reverberation of that frightful voice in actual space was as nothing to the noise it made in Helen's mind. The universe seemed filled with its gigantic roaring. It resounded from earth to heaven and was echoed from the farthest star. Under its impact all other senses sank impotent. Helen became one great ear that could do nothing but listen, listen, rooted to the spot in terror.

Fear alone would not have sufficed to hold her there. Fear alone would have sent her scudding madly back by the way she had come. But there was also loyalty, a dumb, unreasoned, unconscious loyalty. She could not run away without Anne. And Anne did not run. Helen could feel her fingers tremble. Perhaps Anne's legs shook under her, but her feet did not swerve.

Gay explained afterward that she remained where she was for the reason that she thought she had already had exercise enough for one day.

"Are you Mr. French?"

Anne's voice was colorless from fear. Her face

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was colorless too, as pale and obstinate and oddly fierce as it had looked when Helen first knew her.

"Go away!" bellowed the little man. "Go away!" His stick whirled deliriously.

The slender thread of Anne's voice continued its catechism. "Were you ever in Westport, Maine?"

The little man threw up both hands and emitted an inarticulate roar of wrath.

Suddenly Anne stamped her foot. She took a step forward, her hand still in Helen's. Into her face came an expression Helen had seen once before on Anne's features, a compelling imperative look, a look like her grandfather's.

"Do you think we wanted to come here?" she threw at the hermit. "Do you think we shall ever come again? We came to find out something. We must find it out. Why don't you answer our questions?"

The dapper little man glared at her.

"Tell him about Judith, Gay," Anne ordered.

Gay adjudged it wise to make a short story. "We know a girl named Judith French," she said rapidly, "who can't remember living anywhere but in an orphan's home. She was born in Westport, Maine, and she has no relatives at all so far as she knows. We are trying to find some relatives for her. Her father's name was Raymond Liston French. Her mother's name was Melissa



“GET OUT OF HERE ! GO AWAY !”

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White. We thought you might—perhaps—perhaps ——”

“Be her great-uncle or something,” Helen finished, quaking.

The hermit appeared beyond speech. Even his unintelligible roar had deserted him.

“She is a splendid girl.” Gay had found her voice again.

“She works for her board, taking care of a baby ——” Helen ran out of breath easily under the hermit’s eye.

“She smiles,” Gay said, “when you might think she’d cry.”

“She is the cheerfullest girl ——” Again Helen’s breath failed her.

The three eyed the petrified hermit solicitously for a minute. Then Anne returned to her catechism.

“Were you born in Westport, Maine?”

The little man came alive with a bellow beside which his former thunders had been as the cooing of doves. “I never heard of Westport, Maine. Get out of here! Go away! *Scat!*”

With a terrific whirl of his cane he started toward them. The three inquisitors broke ranks and fled. Through the shrubbery tunnel, past the monkeys and the dog, around the house and across the lawn, by the deer and the elephant, slipping,

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tumbling, scrambling up only to fall again in their frantic haste and roll over and over before they could clutch at a leg of animal or low hanging limb of tree and find their feet again, pell-mell the hermit's visitors departed. Between the lions and out into the road they panted, and on past the spring, staggering, gasping, slackening speed only to spurt again. At last Helen stubbed her toe on a rut in the road and, pitching head foremost, lay prone.

Gay threw a glance over her shoulder, halted and staggered back to the fallen girl. Anne had already dropped beside Helen.

"Hurt?" Gay managed to articulate.

"Is—is he—coming?"

"No sign of him."

"I couldn't—run another—step—if he—was going to kill me."

Gay stretched out a hand to Helen and another to Anne. "Better—get out of—the road."

They rose weakly and the three reeled over to the side of the road and sat down on an ice-covered boulder.

"Nobody—followed—us," Anne gasped.

"What did you run for?" Gay asked her.

"That is what—I—don't know."

"I ran—after I got started," Helen explained, "because I had—started—and because—you ran."

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"I ran," Gay said, "firstly, because everybody else ran. Secondly, to please the hermit. He wanted us to run."

"Well," Helen exclaimed, "that's over! We'll never have even to think of doing it again." She turned on Anne. "You——" she began. "Oh, Anne!" Then she hugged her.

Anne squeezed back. "What makes you hug me?"

"You were—wonderful. Anne, I never in my life saw anybody like you!" Helen's whole soul glowed in tribute in her eyes as she gazed at Anne.

Gay nodded. "Anne was all right. When you stood up there, and quizzed that hermit—— He could have knocked me over with a feather."

"So he could me," Anne told them. "I did not have to talk with my legs."

"We all talked," Gay said. "Taking us by and large we did pretty well, on the whole. But the best of us was Anne."

"No," Anne's voice was peremptory. "I will not have you say so."

"Anne Alden," Gay informed her, "if you begin to talk to me as you did to that hermit I shall run all the way home."

"Don't!" Helen begged. "I can't run another step, Gay."

The president of F. O. C. stood up. "If we

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don't tell on ourselves, nobody is going to know that we ran at all."

"Why, where are the other girls?" Astonishment brought Helen to her feet.

"Just missed 'em?"

"The hermit drove everything out of my head, Gay."

"Vamoosed," said Gay. "Evaporated from the landscape. Maybe they got tired waiting. Maybe they decided to call out the militia. Now if you get up too, Anne, we'll all be up and we can start along home."

"I have lost my ribbon." Anne rose obediently.

"I have lost everything that was not sewed on to me," Gay informed her. "The hermit's welcome to 'em. I shan't call around at his side door and ask for my property."

Abreast, Gay in the middle, the three trudged along the road. They felt no desire to run on the crust and slide. They began to perceive that their helter-skelter good-bye to the hermit had rather taken it out of them.

"Hello," said Gay, "the relief expedition appears."

Mary rounded a curve in the road ahead. With a cry of joy she turned to wave at somebody behind her, then hurried forward.

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"Oh, girls, what did he do to you?"

"We thought we were never going to see you again!" Estelle had caught up with Mary.

"We had a satisfactory call, very satisfactory. Don't you think so?" Gay interrogated Helen.

Helen played up nobly to Gay's lead. "Yes, indeed. We found out all that we wanted to and something more."

"Did you hear anything?" Gay turned to the other two.

"Did we!"

Estelle shivered. "I can hear it yet."

"We ran away," Mary confessed. "We didn't stop to think, we just ran."

"So we judged," said Gay, "when we found the road empty. The hermit has a fine voice, so strong and resonant."

"Was it really the hermit who made that noise, Gay?"

"Come to think of it, Spud, the gentleman failed to introduce himself. We judged, and I think you would have agreed with us, that he was the hermit. We tried to be very tactful." Gay giggled suddenly. The word recalled memories. "He seemed to have no hesitation in addressing us, but, as I say, we tried to be tactful. We avoided all references to his manner of life. Anne called him Mr. French."

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"Anne!"

"Certainly. Anne did most of the talking."

"I did not," said Anne.

"Oh, we all talked," Gay explained, "but I doubt whether we should have opened our mouths if Anne hadn't started conversation. The laurels are Anne's."

"I wish you would talk sense, Gay," mourned Estelle.

Here the advancing pedestrians came upon the remaining members of F. O. C., arguing heatedly over the direction in which they should proceed. Grace rushed at them and threw her arms about the neck of each of the daring three.

"Oh, you heroines! Are you really all right? We didn't know what that awful man had done to you, and we thought we'd better hurry home for help and ——"

"That's what we thought you'd thought, Gracie. Lucky we caught up with you before you turned the town out in a body to call on our hermit. He's not a sociable person."

"Begin at the beginning," Sally begged, "and tell us exactly what happened."

"Veni, vidi, vici," Gay quoted grandiloquently.

"My goodness!" cried Grace. "Then what we heard —— Is he really the great-uncle? When's he going to see Judith?"

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"Great-uncle! I should hope not!"

"But you said you came out on the top of the heap," Sally put in.

"We did," Gay asserted. "We're here, aren't we? That's more than I'd be likely to say of you if you'd seen the hermit, Gracie."

"Was he awful?"

"I don't believe he was horrid at all."

"You heard him," said Helen.

Grace and Sally opened their eyes. "Honestly—was that—the hermit?"

"Honestly, it was."

"And you—you actually got out of him what we wanted to know?" gasped Estelle.

"Anne did," Gay said.

"Anne *spoke* to him?" The four almost whispered the incredulous words.

"Anne stamped her foot at him." Helen spoke.

"I never. Did I, Helen?"

"You certainly did," Helen and Gay assured her.

"I do not remember doing that."

"And you looked like Mr. Lathrop. Your face did."

"Truly, Helen?" Anne's countenance glowed.

Mary Tracy eyed the three principals sceptically.

"You must have been pretty splendid."

"We were," Gay acknowledged unblushingly.

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"It astounds me to remember some things that we did—and said. The only time I quite recognized us was when—oh, it's too good to keep—when we stampeded down that hill at the end."

"You ran away?"

"We ran away."

"I don't call that very splendid."

Gay looked Grace over from head to foot. "Perhaps," she remarked loftily, "if you had been in our place, when your call was over, and you had found out everything that you wanted to know, you might have retreated somewhat—er—precipitately, Miss Howe, had the gentleman you were calling on come at you with a stick, bellowing like a bull of Bashan."

"Not really!" gasped Estelle.

"We heard him! We heard him!" Grace was dancing up and down with excitement and impatience.

"He invited us to leave and we left, to find," Gay continued, "that other people had done it before us."

"Just what was it he told you?" Mary questioned.

"That he never heard of Westport, Maine," said Anne.

"Do you mean," Grace cried, "that we planned everything out so nicely and took this long walk

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and got frightened out of our wits half a dozen times, all for nothing?"

"Exactly that," said Gay.

"Well, I don't think much of him!"

Nevertheless, Grace found the tale that Gay told, seconded by promptings from Helen and Anne, well worth listening to. The recital reduced the four auditors to a state of spellbound agitation delicious to experience. Gay told it well, giving due weight to the rotting piazza planks, the cascading monkeys, and the shrubbery tunnel.

"Anne walked right out of it," continued the narrator with a flourish. "I can't think what she wanted to do it for. I didn't. I preferred to see the monkeys again. But Anne and Helen walked out. There was the hermit in a kind of winter garden taking his afternoon constitutional. He had his back to us and the sun was in our eyes and it had been dark among the bushes. We squinted across the snow at him and at first I thought he was about ten feet tall. In a minute I saw that was a wrong estimate. He's five three, I guess, or maybe three and five-eighths, though when he turned around and roared and I thought he was about to eat us alive, he shot up to twenty and kept on going. Anne opened conversation, as I said before. I suppose she remembered you

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wanted him put at his ease, Gracie. He looked easy enough to me. It was we who needed somebody to be tactful to us, *I* thought. Anne trotted up to him as cool as you please—oh, she left a little space between, I was thankful for that—and she said ——”

“You make me sound brave,” Anne interrupted, “and I was not brave. I was scared stiff.”

“Your legs worked all right,” Helen admonished her, “and your voice.”

“Who is telling this story?” Gay demanded. “And Anne said ——”

“You do not tell it right.”

“Go on, Gay, *quick!*” cried the four.

“And Anne said ——” Gay carried the recital to its precipitate end.

In awestruck silence the listeners entered town. Finally Estelle spoke.

“It sounds,” she said, “too good to be true. Didn’t you make it all up, Gay?”

Gay wheeled on her. “Miss Lawrence!”

“No,” said Mary Tracy, “they didn’t. I’m sure of that. If they had made it up, they wouldn’t have said that they ran away at the end.”

“That’s true,” Estelle acknowledged. “They wouldn’t. I beg your pardon, Gay. Don’t be cross.”

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"Aspersing my voracity!" groaned Gay.

"You *are* heroines." Grace's voice carried the conviction of her soul. "And you don't look any different from what you did before, except a little mussy."

The others squealed gleefully.

"Some day, Gracie," said Gay, "you'll be the death of me."

So the seven neared home, to all appearances, as Grace had described them, much like the seven who had set out in the earlier afternoon. But now their hearts beat with the elation of peril safely past. They were inclined to strut a little, to hold their heads high, and wish the people they met could know of their marvelous adventure. They thought there were not many people in town who had talked with a hermit. The four who had not done it crept under the mantle of the three who had dared and drew its glory admiringly around them. The courageous three themselves began to prance a little. The voices of F. O. C. rose a trifle. Their laughter threatened to become shrill. They occupied more space than they needed on the sidewalk. Altogether, they thought exceedingly well of themselves. All but Anne. Anne had a disconcerting way of sticking to the point in hand. She stuck to it, whether or no it pricked her, and it pricked her now.

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"We have not found out anything about Judith."

"We have found another place where we needn't look," Helen countered. "That's something."

The others took but momentary notice of Anne's words. Their minds were too full of positive adventure to give much attention to negative results. Even Anne was not cast down by the thought. Who could grieve when her fellows showed by every look and word that they admired her? Admiration was still too new to Anne's experience to be lightly treated.

She and Helen turned into their own street, walking on air. "I wish we had asked him a little more," Helen regretted. "I can think now of plenty of things we might have said."

"We asked him enough," said Anne.

"Why do you suppose he has all those queer animals on his lawn?"

"To scare people away, maybe."

"They didn't scare us—very much."

"The monkeys did, and the dog. The monkeys made me feel queer."

"But we kept right on," said Helen.

Uplifted, she entered her house. Through that door she had last issued, an ordinary girl. Now she returned—a heroine. Helen's thoughts touched the word fearfully, fascinated. It must be true.

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The girls had said so. Yet how could that glorious word apply to her? A million times, it seemed to Helen, she had dreamed of doing splendid deeds. Now she had done one. Only she wished, she passionately wished, that she hadn't run away. That ignominious flight had left a sting. It spoiled the picture.

For a minute Helen loitered in the hall, doing it over. She saw herself standing nobly awaiting the hermit's onslaught. She saw the whirling stick drop peacefully to his side; she watched the fires die in the blazing eyes; she heard the bellow dwindle in his throat. He came to a halt a yard in front of her. "What—what—what can I do for you?" faltered the little man humbly. After that they might have walked up and down together along the carefully swept paths. They might—— Anything was possible at this distance.

Helen abandoned the impressive picture, and skipped on through the house to find her mother. Closing the oven door on the potatoes, Mrs. Thayer looked up to meet an animated face.

"Oh, mother, *mother!* We've seen the hermit! Gay and Anne and I. The others wouldn't go. They were scared. We were scared too, but Anne—Anne insisted somebody must go in and of course we couldn't let her go alone. He never

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heard of the place where Judith came from. That was all he said, except to tell us to go away. It was perfectly frightful, mother. The monkeys were the worst! But Anne went right on. And the girls think we're heroines. Anne was—I'm sure of that—only we ran away at the end. We just skedaddled. He came for us, you know, and ——”

“Helen! What in the world are you talking about?”

“Why, the hermit, mother. You know, Mr. French. The man who lives across the line in Maywood, just beyond Kirk's spring. The place is a perfect ruin, you never saw anything like it. It's lots worse than it looks from the road. You wouldn't think it could be, but it is. He has animals set about everywhere, made of iron, an elephant and a deer and a bear and ——”

“But what was my daughter doing in this man's grounds?”

“We had to ask him a question, F. O. C. did. You see, we thought he might be Judith's great-uncle. There isn't any French family in town. He's the only one anywhere round that we could hear of, and of course you can't call him a family exactly. We thought of writing a letter, but hermits —— Well, you know, mother, what their habits are. They simply don't answer your letters if you write them, and we had to know

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whether this one came from Westport, Maine. So we decided to go ourselves. If he turned out to be related to Judith, it would be grand, for of course he has bushels of money hidden away somewhere, and anyway we had to find out about him before we tried any one else for Judith. Wasn't it all right for us to do? We didn't tell anybody, because it seemed as though Judith ought to be the first one to know if he was her uncle, and if he wasn't, we didn't like to get her hopes up only to dash them down again. Though I almost told you he might be her uncle the night after we went coasting, when you hushed me up, mother. Wasn't it all right?"

"All right, Nell, to trespass on private grounds in order to speak with a man who has given every indication possible that he does not wish to see visitors?"

"But—but, mother ——"

"I am very much ashamed of you, daughter."

Helen wilted.

"It was not kind, or polite," continued her mother. "It did not show even common decency. The only excuse for what you have done is that you did it thoughtlessly. But I do not wish my daughter to be a girl for whom excuses of that kind have to be made."

"But Judith ——" Helen besought.

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"Judith has too much sound sense ever to have thought of such a thing. So I supposed had at least one or two other members of the club, Helen. That the recluse whose privacy you infringed this afternoon might, because of the coincidence of name, prove to be related to your friend Judith is an idea worthy only of a very silly and romantic schoolgirl."

"We—we all thought it."

"Then you all need to cultivate common sense." Mrs. Thayer's face was very grave. "I want my little girl to learn to base her fancies on the laws of fact. Above all I wish her to be considerate of the point of view of others, whether those others live like the people she is accustomed to or not."

Across the street Anne also was seeing F. O. C.'s adventure in a new light.

"My dear Anne," said her grandfather when Anne's story was done, "I regret exceedingly that you did not communicate with me before taking this action."

Perplexity troubled the clear decision of Anne's face.

"Not that I wish you to consult me in all matters, Anne. I desire to have you feel free to exercise your own judgment. However, in the affair of this afternoon, granddaughter, it would have been better had you spoken with me."

"You mean you are sorry I went?"

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"You have stated the fact, Anne. It pains me deeply."

"Why, grandfather?"

"It was not a courteous thing to do, Anne."

"You mean because I went into a yard that did not belong to me?"

"You forced yourself into the presence of a man who desired to be alone. You compelled him to speak when he wished to be silent."

"I was not thinking of that," Anne said. "I was thinking of Judith. I wanted her to belong to somebody."

Mr. Lathrop put his arm around the small wistful figure and lifted it to his knee.

"I do not think," he said, "that Miss French would care to belong to the gentleman you called on, Anne."

"Now that I have seen him I do not want her to belong to him." Anne shivered. "He—he frightens me—to think of him frightens me."

"There is nothing really frightful about him," said her grandfather. "Except for the lonely life he has chosen to live—which is, I confess, Anne, a somewhat terrifying conception—Marcus French is the gentlest, the shyest of men."

"His voice was not shy," Anne objected. "Do you know him?"

"I used to know him more than twenty years

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ago. When he came to live in this vicinity he let it be understood that he wished to hold no dealings with old friends and to make no new acquaintances. I have respected his wish."

Anne meditated. "What made him want to live like that?"

"He had found the world of men and women too difficult, and he decided to essay a life without the men and women. I confess, Anne, I am unable to follow his reasoning. The very gentleness of his soul was his undoing." A shadow crossed the finely cut features. "Marcus French was made of too soft fiber to withstand the world; he elected, while still in the flesh, to leave it."

"I do not quite understand."

"Neither do I, my dear."

"Was his voice always loud—like that?" Anne shivered again.

"He had the softest man's voice I ever heard."

Anne marveled. Then a tear slowly welled over her lashes and slid down her cheek.

"Why, Anne! Anne, my dear!"

"I have made you sorry," she said. "I wouldn't have done that for—anything." She hid her face against his coat.

He held her close. "Truth compels me to admit," his lips said close to the small ear, "that I am also proud of you, Anne."

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She turned in his arms and gazed up at him. "Proud—of *me*, grandfather?"

A smile twitched at his lips. "Of the fact that you did not run away sooner."

Again Anne made her confession. "I wanted to run all the time."

"Plenty of soldiers would like to run, granddaughter. If they want to and don't, they're good soldiers."

"But you said you were sorry I went."

"My feelings are mixed, Anne. I am indeed sorry you went, but since the fact remains that you did go, I am glad that you stayed as long as you did."

The small face bloomed. "Helen told me I looked like you, grandfather. That makes twice she has said it."

Anne thought a long while with her head against her grandfather's shoulder.

"He would never have done for Judith," she said at last. "Judith likes folks."

CHAPTER VI

AFTERWARD

"I SUPPOSE it was pretty cheeky of us," Sally acknowledged when Helen and Anne had gloomily reported the reception accorded their recital. "I hadn't thought of it that way till now."

"All I thought of was Judith," Mary Tracy remarked.

"If it was cheeky, we'll have to apologize," said Gay.

"You can't apologize to a hermit."

"Why not, Gracie?"

"Because he's a hermit."

"I don't see how you can, either," Estelle agreed, "without being more cheeky."

"Do you mean, Gay," Helen questioned, "that we ought to go and see him again? Because if you do ——"

"I do not," said Gay hastily. "A note written by the secretary-treasurer is about my idea."

"He won't read it." Sally shook her head emphatically. "Real hermits, like the kind Mr. Lathrop says he is, never read their mail. They don't want mail."

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"I don't care whether he reads it or not," Gay declared. "That isn't our business."

"But what good is it going to do for us to write it, if he doesn't read it?" questioned Estelle.

"Maybe it will make us feel respectable again," said Anne.

"I feel respectable enough now," said Grace. "Don't you, Sally?"

"Middling," Sally rejoined. "But I'm willing to stand for the note."

"Oh, I'll stand for it," Grace agreed. "Want some paper, Helen?"

"Make it short," suggested Estelle.

"The shorter it is, the better he'll like it," Mary said, "if he ever reads it at all."

After much consultation, many revisions, and several entirely new starts, F. O. C.'s apology was completed to the satisfaction of all concerned.

"The three girls who went to see him last Saturday afternoon wish to beg Mr. French's pardon for intruding on his privacy." (That phrase was Helen's.) "They would not have done it, if they had thought more before they went."

"Reading that ought not to hurt him," Gay said. "Stick this stamp on it, Helen. We'll drop it into the box when we go home and so good-bye to the hermit. What shall we do next?"

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"What is there to do?" asked Grace.

"I thought you were looking up Jack White."

"There's nothing in that, Spud. His people moved here from Syracuse, New York, and his father was born in Chicago. They never had anything to do with Westport, Maine. His mother told me so."

"I tried Alice White's family," Estelle announced. "She has three uncles, you know, and they all have plenty of children. I asked her whether she belonged to the Maine Whites and Alice said she didn't think so. Her father and all his brothers were born in Monson and Alice's grandfather lives there yet in a house that his father lived in and I don't know how many of his ancestors before him. A good many, Alice said. It's been in the family a hundred and fifty years, and Alice and her cousins go over for Thanksgiving every year."

"I discovered a family of Whites on Walnut Street," Gay announced, "that nobody seemed to know anything about. The house was nice, and they looked all right. So one day I rang the doorbell. The lady who came to the door had a baby at her skirts. It sounded as though there were more up-stairs. She asked me to step into the hall and I asked her if she knew whether her husband belonged to the Westport branch of the

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great White family. I said genealogies were interesting and the Westport Whites were a fine set of people, though pretty well scattered—a book of Whites would be a good thing to have. She said her husband came from Delaware and could trace his ancestors back to Peregrine White, who was born on the ‘Mayflower,’ but none of his line had ever lived in Maine. She hoped I’d let her know when the book came out, because her husband was keen on genealogy and he always bought all the White books he could find. I said the date hadn’t been set yet, in fact I rather doubted if there ever would be a book, this bunch of Whites were so hard to get at. We both bowed and scraped and I came away.”

“Gay Flint!”

“That’s my name, Gracie. How did you happen to mention it?”

“Even if I’d had wit enough to think up that string, I never should have been able to carry it through,” mourned Estelle. “How do you manage such things, Gay?”

“Minds differ,” Gay returned modestly. “But she almost got me with that request about letting her know when the book came out. Never occurred to me she’d take me up on a general remark. I just put the thing in for plausibility. Never mind—‘All’s well that ends well.’”

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"I don't see," Estelle pondered, "but that we've come to a dead stop."

"We've raked the town with a fine tooth comb for Frenches and Whites," Gay acknowledged, "and there's nothing doing."

"I should hope," said Sally, "there wouldn't be anything doing again as bad as that hermit. I think he was perfectly horrid."

"So do I," Grace chimed in. "I haven't any use for him. We'll never find any relatives for Judith French. How could we? There aren't any to find."

"You don't know that," expostulated Helen.

"Well, you don't know that there are any. I don't see but I've just as good a right to say there aren't any as you have to say there are."

"I'd rather say there are."

"And keep on getting into scrapes like that hermit one, I suppose. No, thank you."

"Don't let it worry you," drawled Gay. "You didn't get anywhere near so far as Helen did into the hermit scrape."

"Don't, Gay," murmured Helen.

"No, thank goodness, I didn't."

"Getting hot, Gracie?"

"What should I get hot about? That I didn't go as far as some of the rest of you? I don't call that hermit business a bit nice!"

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"Whew-ew-ew!" Gay whistled. "Hear the perfect lady!"

"Just the same, Gay Flint, a lady doesn't call on perfectly strange men in their own houses!"

"Little lesson in etiquette," grinned Gay. "Get the facts right, Gracie. *Outside* their own houses, you mean."

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

"Stop quarreling, children," said Mary lightly. "Did you go coasting Saturday night, Gracie?"

"Yes, I did, and I'm going again to-night. I've got to study now. I'm sick and tired of hearing about that old hermit. Coming, Sally?"

Sally and Grace departed and the others looked at each other interrogatively.

"What ruffled her feathers?" Gay asked.

"I think," said Estelle, "it was something Phil Knowles said about you three and the hermit."

Gay sat up erect with a jerk. "That story isn't going all over town, is it?"

"How did Phil Knowles know about the hermit?" Helen demanded.

"I judge Grace told him," said Estelle.

"Little tattle-tale!"

"That isn't fair, Gay," Mary remonstrated. "You know yourself it makes a first rate story, and that Grace's tongue wags at both ends. Nothing was said about keeping still."

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"Nothing was said, because we supposed the rest of you had sense."

"Grace doesn't always use the sense she has when she's talking," said Mary.

"What was it Phil said that made her mad?" Gay inquired.

"He seemed to be admiring you."

"Me!"

"You and Helen and Anne," said Estelle. "He was asking her to tell over again how you three stood up to the hermit. It finally percolated her brain that she wasn't the center of admiration at the moment. Grace doesn't take kindly to playing second to anybody's first when a boy's around."

"Pooh!" said Gay. "If that's all, she'll get over it. Want me to mail our letter, Helen?"

Disconsolately Helen watched the girls trail down the steps and through the gate. Anne went with them and Helen let her go. The world seemed suddenly and unpremeditatedly to have turned upside down. Half an hour before all had appeared normal and pleasant. Now everything was out of plumb and off-color. Just why, it would have been hard to say. Grace had not been very cross. Five minutes of good-natured chaffing would have smoothed out Grace's wrinkles. Dimly Helen was conscious that they had all acted like powder to the match of Grace's temper. Not a

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quick flash and everything done with. Wet powder perhaps, that fizzled and sputtered and kept on sputtering. Helen felt a little sick at the sense of it. Now F. O. C. would never have any more good times. How could they, when one girl was jealous? "You were jealous yourself last fall," memory reminded her, but Helen refused to listen. "That was different," she reflected, "and besides, I kept it to myself." Why couldn't anybody else keep it to herself? Gay thought that Grace would get over it, but Helen didn't. Helen thought nothing would ever again be quite right in the whole universe, whether Grace got over it or not. She dropped a tear on the grave of the good fellowship that had been and now was spoiled forever.

As a matter of fact Helen was very tired. Not indeed physically; but as the excitement of the visit to the hermit ebbed, it left her an easy prey to the blues. Too much hermit was what ailed Grace and the rest, and they, no more than Helen, were aware of it. They too thought the bottom had fallen out of their familiar world and they were inclined to blame it very severely for not staying put.

Helen carried a long face into the living-room, where her mother's needle was flying back and forth in close propinquity to a high-piled mending

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basket. Helen would have liked to talk to her mother, but the twins were also in the room. The twins were at the moment engaged in stalking bears through a primeval forest satisfactorily represented by the spiring legs of several upturned chairs.

Helen almost scowled at the twins, but she didn't quite. Feeling very solemn and unhappy, she wandered vaguely about the room, resting her weight first on one leg and then on the other. It was just possible, she thought, that her mother would see that something had gone wrong and send Ted and Tess away. Mrs. Thayer, however, appeared to notice nothing amiss.

When Helen in her tour of the room again approached the table, her mother looked up and smiled at her.

"If you have nothing else to do for a few minutes, little daughter, I wish you'd look over these stockings."

Helen sat down and began to look them over. She didn't want to, at all. In fact, now that her mother had spoken, she could think of a dozen things that she would rather do. If she could talk — But she couldn't talk of what she desired with the twins present, and nothing else seemed worth mentioning. Lugubriously Helen threaded a needle and dropped the "egg" to the toe of a

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stocking. It was a horrible hole, as Ted's usually were. The girl desired to jab at it viciously, but she knew that holes did not take kindly to jabbing. Slowly back and forth, in and out, went her needle, weaving the ragged edges together. The work began to interest her; the steady rhythm of the needle soothed her. With her hands busy, she forgot for a few minutes to think about her thoughts.

The twins gave over stalking their bear and cavorted cheerfully into the circle of lamplight.

"Set the chairs up, dears," said their mother.

They set them up and returned, athirst for fresh experiences.

"Tell us a story, Nell," begged Tess.

"Yes, tell us a story," Ted echoed.

"Oh, dear!" thought Helen. "I do wish you'd go away."

But she didn't say the words aloud. She looked at her mother's head bent over the swift needle, at the mending basket which was never empty, and the words she wanted to say stuck in her throat.

"What kind of story, twinnies?"

"Not a story we've ever heard before," Ted announced, composing himself to the business of listening.

"A true story!" Tess clapped her hands. "A true story!"

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Helen thought a minute, while her needle moved more slowly. She did not feel like making up stories. All the old stories had flown out of her brain, and as for new ones, she hadn't an idea in her head. The twins' round confident eyes devoured her, as though they expected to see the story mapped on her face before she opened her lips.

"Once upon a time," said Helen slowly, "there was a princess who hadn't any palace. She lost it when she was a tiny girl and with it she lost all the people that usually go with a princess, like kings and queens and princes and other princesses. This princess hadn't any father or mother or brothers or sisters. She lived in a little hut on the edge of a forest and when she wasn't busy going to school she took care of a baby."

"Like Judith?" suggested Tess.

"Ye-e-s, like Judith," Helen acknowledged.

Ted dug his elbow into his sister's ribs. "S-s-sh! Let her get on with the story."

"She wanted a palace very much, but particularly she wanted the people that go with a palace. Who did I say they were?"

"King 'n' queen," said Ted promptly.

"And princes 'n' princesses," Tess added.

Helen nodded. "That's right. This princess knew there wasn't any chance of her getting her own palace back again ——"

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"Why wasn't there?" demanded both twins.

"I can't go into that to-day. There wasn't. You'll just have to believe it."

Reluctantly they assented. "Tell us to-morrow?" said Ted.

"She knew she couldn't get her own palace back again, but she thought perhaps there might be a palace somewhere that had in it everybody else who ought to be in a palace, but lacked just one princess. So she set out to see.

"She walked and she walked and she walked, but at every palace where she stopped to inquire they had plenty of princesses. Sometimes they told her of a palace where they had heard one princess was gone, but when she got to the palace she always found either that they had always had their full number of princesses or that a new one had just come and no more were needed. But she kept on walking and she kept on hoping. 'For,' she said to herself, 'there must somewhere be a palace that needs one more princess. And there might be a palace that hadn't any princesses at all, but just princes. Then wouldn't they be glad to see me!'

"So she walked and she walked until she came to a broken down old castle that looked as though nobody lived in it. The moat was dried up and grasses had grown on the donjon towers and the

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windows were broken and there was nothing the least bit inviting about it. But the princess went in because, you see, she was trying every single palace she came to. She had promised herself not to skip one.

"Now, I'll tell you a secret." Helen lowered her voice. The stocking dropped to her lap, and the twins drew nearer. "A magician lived in the castle," Helen whispered. "He had laid a spell on it, and that was why the moat looked dried up and the grasses waved on the donjon and the windows seemed ruined. You know what magicians can do. But the princess didn't know it. She thought it really was ruined, and she never dreamed of the magician. She never dreamed that the animals under the walls weren't made of iron, the way they looked, but were real live animals that could jump and climb and—and roar, if only the magician would let them."

"You never said nothin' 'bout animals!" cried Ted.

"No, you never," Tess corroborated. "Was 'er a lion?"

"Two," said Helen. "Two lions, crouching down low, all ready to spring, at the gate."

"My eye!" Ted breathed.

"What else?" Tess clamored.

"S-sh! She'll tell us."

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“Let me see, there was a deer with antlers on his head, great branching ones. And a bear standing up on its hind legs just exactly the way it stood when the magician cast his spell on the palace. And a giraffe, with its long neck going up, up, and its head in the trees. There was a dog too—the king’s own dog turned to stone just outside the king’s garden. And the king’s monkeys—he kept a lot of them because he liked to watch them swinging about from bough to bough—the monkeys had turned to iron right up in the branches and there they were hanging on by their tails exactly the way they were hanging the minute that the spell fell on them. It was winter at the palace. It was always winter. That was part of the spell, too. And everything was covered with snow and ice, the grasses on the donjon walls, the lions and the dog and the monkeys—everything. But the worst thing about the palace was the king. The magician had taken away his voice and in place of it he had given him a roar. The king couldn’t say anything nicely. He could only roar it at the top of his lungs. It was frightful to hear him. He would walk through the palace grounds all buried in snow and ice and lean over to pat his dog—for the king thought the dog liked to be patted even if it had turned to iron—and say, ‘Poor doggie! Good fellow!’ And the best he

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could do was to make such a noise that if the dog hadn't been iron he would have run away so fast the king couldn't ever have caught him. It was dreadful.

"The only way the enchantment could ever be lifted," Helen went on dreamily, "was by a princess who shouldn't be afraid even in her heart of the dreadful old roaring king. When our princess came to this castle, she didn't like the look of it a bit, but as I said, she didn't think she ought to skip any castle. So she walked right in between the iron lions and up through the ranks of the beasts. She passed the dog and the monkeys and—and then she came on the king. He roared at her. And what do you think she did?"

Helen gazed for a dramatic moment at the speechless twins.

"She laughed at him. Yes, she did. She thought it was funny for him to make such a noise, and she laughed out loud. The minute she laughed the snow and ice began to melt, and the dog and the monkeys began to thaw, too. The water just poured off their backs. The princess laughed again and everywhere you could hear the trickle of little brooks, where the melted snow was running into the moat. She laughed the third time, and the glass flew into the broken windows and the animals all stretched themselves and tried

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their legs. Then the king put out his hand and his voice when he spoke was gentle and quiet, without a bit of a roar. 'Whose princess are you?' he asked. And the princess said sadly, 'I'm nobody's princess.' 'Then come and live with me,' said the king, 'and be my princess.' 'I will gladly,' said the princess, 'if you want me.' The king took her hand and they looked out over the moat and it was full of water. The castle rose strong and splendid above it and everywhere green branches were waving and flowers were blooming, and the monkeys were chattering in the branches of the trees. The dog jumped up on the king and licked his hand. And the king and the princess lived happily ever after, for the magician never troubled them again."

The twins meditated.

"Didn't the lions eat somebody?" Ted asked.

"No. They were tame lions."

"Huh!" said Ted.

Tess fixed her eyes on her sister's face. "Was that really a true story?"

"Not all of it. Part of it was."

"Which part?"

"The princess is true," said Helen, "and the king, and all about the enchanted castle."

"Were the iron monkeys true?"

"Yes, Ted."

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"My, I'd like to see 'em! Can't I see 'em? Where are they?"

"Within a thousand miles."

"A thousand miles's a nawful long ways, ain't it?"

"Don't say ain't, Ted."

"Judith says it."

"She tries not to."

"Isn't it a nawful long ways?"

"Pretty far."

"Maybe it ain't—isn't, I mean—a whole thousand."

"Maybe it's only a hunderd."

"Maybe it's five hundred, Tess."

"I don't like that story very well," said the little sister. "I like 'em to be all true or all not true."

"So do I, Tess."

"I like it well enough," said Ted. "Only I'd like to know where the lions went. Maybe they got away some time 'n' ate somebody. Tell about that."

"Not to-night," said Helen. "You set up the chairs you were playing with, but you didn't put them where they were before. Suppose you do that now."

The twins reluctantly set themselves to the restoration of complete order in the room.

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Helen sighed. "That's the way it ought to come out, mother."

"You mean, dear, that is the way you would like to have it come out."

"Couldn't it ever—don't you suppose?"

Mrs. Thayer shook her head. "I don't think so. Things aren't apt to happen quite like that in this world of ours, daughter."

"I wish they did," Helen said. "Oh, mother, it would do the hermit a world of good to know Judith!"

"I presume it would."

Helen brightened. "Then perhaps—some day ——"

Mrs. Thayer laid down her work and took Helen's hands. "Stop it, Nell. Stop imagining. There is not the slightest possibility of Mr. French and Judith ever superintending together the painting of that house. So put it out of your head, little daughter. Quick—this minute! '*Scat!*'"

Helen caught the twinkle in her mother's eyes and laughed ruefully. "I suppose I am silly."

"Very silly, sometimes. But also very dear. And very kind and helpful, as this last hour. Oh, I saw—what I saw."

"You see everything, mother." Helen's heart felt singularly light. "But I wish ——" She relinquished the last iridescent bubble of fancy.

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"I'll be sensible, mother. But I don't see how anything nice is ever going to happen to Judith."

"Whatever happens, Judith will make it nice," said her mother.

CHAPTER VII

SAYBROOK VS. RACEFIELD

SOMETIMES Helen feared that nothing whatever was going to happen. Nobody seemed at any pains to try to make anything happen. With the exception of Anne, who was naturally tenacious of any purpose which moved her at all, F. O. C. appeared strangely indifferent.

Once in a while Helen faced a disconcerting suspicion that Judith's case was beyond even F. O. C.'s ministrations. The other girls dodged this specter by pretending it did not concern them. Not seeing what there was to be done, they elected to be happy by doing nothing at all.

"What's the use?" Grace demanded. "You know perfectly well, Helen Thayer, we can't comb the whole state for Frenches and Whites. Anyway, I'd rather go coasting."

"Me too," said Gay. "And play basket-ball. Three o'clock sharp to-morrow afternoon, Helen. We must get busy if we want to beat any team that comes against us."

"Who's coming against us?" Mary Tracy inquired.

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"Racefield is talking of it."

"Really?"

"Estelle knows a girl on the Racefield High's team, and she says they'd like to play us some afternoon, if we're willing."

"Well, we are willing, aren't we?"

Gay grinned. "I am, Sally."

"Oh, dear!" said Grace. "I wish I hadn't cut practice so much this winter."

"You don't wish it any more than I do, Gracie."

"I never dreamed," Grace mourned, "that they'd ever let us play Racefield."

"An afternoon game. Admission by ticket for invited guests. Those are the terms," said Gay. "I saw Mr. Hershey myself this morning."

"Goodness, I hope our team wins!" Sally exclaimed.

"Of course we'll win," Grace reproved her. "What are you talking about? Who else could win?"

"Nobody," said Estelle. "The Racefield team is good, though. They have a crackerjack of a goal thrower, Bess says."

"What's the matter with Helen?"

"Oh, I'm no crackerjack. I wish I were. Maybe I won't be on the team at all. Plenty of girls ——"

"Throw just as good baskets as you do," Gay

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interrupted her. "That's what you started to say, Helen, and it isn't true. Plenty of 'em don't."

"May Rhodes ——" began Helen.

"May Rhodes is a dandy goal thrower," Gay agreed.

"What! That little red-haired thing?"

"That little red-haired thing' is a perfect streak of lightning when it comes to basket-ball, Gracie."

"Her hair isn't so very red," Estelle ventured.

"In some lights it is almost brown."

"Spud here isn't slow herself," Sally remarked.

"I've watched her."

Gay grinned. "All of which goes to prove that Racefield hasn't a chance against us—capital U, capital S."

"Do you mean you think they will beat us, Gay?"

"The mighty thought I am trying to communicate, Anne, is that I don't know anything about it, and can't guess."

"Well, I know," said Grace. "We're not going to let 'em."

"Bravo!" Estelle and Sally clapped their hands.

"If noise will help, we'll furnish it," they promised.

"You will have to get up the snappiest songs that were ever heard of and sing 'em at the game. That's where the audience is coming in," said Gay.

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"Racefield has a lot of songs already," Estelle volunteered. "Bess told me so. She's the girl I know on their team. They play Maywood to-morrow."

"They'll be veterans, won't they?"

"Something pretty near it, Sally."

"Oh, well, we won't let 'em down us, no matter how many teams they've played," Grace cried. "I'm coming to the practice to-morrow, Gay."

"All right. Come and give us something to play against."

"I'll come too," said Sally. "Want me to coach?"

"Just as you like."

"We'll all be there," Estelle said, "and tell you what we think of our chances."

"Stop!" Grace cried. "I don't want to hear anybody say anything like that again. We're going to win. Don't you know we are going to win?"

"Beg pardon, Gracie. I meant we'll decide by how much of a margin Gay is going to beat the Racefield team."

"That's better," Grace told her. Nobody seemed to remember, Grace least of all, that she had ever been cross.

But it was only too evident that F. O. C. had lost interest in the search for Judith's great-uncle.

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That showed in every word and gesture. The girls took up this new enthusiasm as whole-heartedly as did Judith herself.

"A basket-ball game? Sure, I'll be there, if I have to take Johnny along too. He'd like it, wouldn't he?"

"We will have Johnny for a mascot!" Gay cried.

Judith's grin spread from ear to ear. "Mascot? I don't know what a mascot is, but if it don't hurt, you can have him. I guess Johnny'd like being a mascot as well as the next boy. He's a spunky little tyke, Johnny is."

"She doesn't seem to care," Anne mourned to Helen afterward. "But she knows about the hermit. I told her."

"So did I," said Helen. "I guess she is glad we didn't find him for her uncle."

Anne nodded. "So she said. 'I'd rather have Johnny any day, Anne.' I remember the exact words."

"I suppose," Helen thought aloud, "I suppose we might as well try Gay's way and let the uncle come of himself."

"If we do not watch for him, how shall we know if he does come? He might go by and nobody know it was he."

"That is so," Helen acknowledged, "but ——

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Oh, dear! We can't make the girls stay interested."

Anne turned her obstinate little chin full on her chum. "Why don't they stay interested? They were interested. Why don't they stay so?"

"I don't know," Helen returned weakly. "I suppose it's because there doesn't seem to be anything to do now. Can you think of anything to do?"

Anne shook her head.

"Then I'm going to learn to steer a bob-sled. Harry said he'd show me this afternoon."

Steering a bob-sled, Helen decided, was quite as much fun as she thought it would be, though it kept her so busy that she found less attention than ever to bestow on her delightful sensations. Between the top of the hill and the bottom she had to keep her eyes open and her hands steady. Should she stop for a second to think of anything except the course she was following, something would be sure to go wrong. The possibility of running violently askew and spilling herself and Harry into the ditch was always present in the corner of her brain to encourage concentration. But she got what she wanted, the sensation of flying down-hill with nobody's back to break the sweep of the road before her.

She also got the chance to help pull the bob-sled

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up-hill, and this too pleased her for a while. When it ceased to amuse, she continued to tug uncomplainingly. About that time Harry was giving her mind too much to think of for her to notice what her body was doing.

"Say, do you call it square, the way you're treating me?" he began.

"I?"

"Yes, you."

Helen regarded the boy with astonished eyes.

"But I haven't done anything at all!"

"That's just the trouble—what you haven't done."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Harry."

"Knowles didn't say anything about a place over in Maywood. Knowles didn't know anybody round here named French—isn't that so? But Grace Howe tells Knowles on Saturday night what happened over in Maywood on Saturday afternoon."

"Oh!" said Helen. "Oh!" Her inflections spoke volumes.

"Now I guess you see."

"I see what you are talking about, but I don't see why I should have told you. Grace hadn't any business to tell Phil Knowles."

Harry waived the point. "Didn't you say

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as soon as there was anything to tell you'd tell me?"

"Ye-e-s. But there wasn't anything to tell. I mean ——"

"No, there wasn't. Nothing at all except seeing the hermit and talking back to him and ——" Harry chuckled. "Wisht I'd seen you three scoot down that hill!"

"I don't!" Helen blushed painfully. She could not yet laugh about the flight as Gay did.

Harry noted the blush and interpreted it as a heroine's flush of modesty. "You three were all right," he assured her. "All right. Say, did Anne Alden really stamp her foot at him?"

"Did Grace say that?"

"She sure did."

"Yes," Helen acknowledged, "Anne stamped her foot."

"Tell a fellow, can't you? What makes you so close-mouthed?"

Helen thought a minute. "I didn't mean not to play fair, Harry," she said. "I honestly never thought I could tell you without —— But as long as Grace told Phil, I guess it's all right. Only you will keep it just as quiet as you can, won't you?"

Harry promised and Helen told her tale. She told it simply without Gay's embellishments, and with certain important omissions. She did not

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mention what question Anne had put to the hermit.

When she finished Harry addressed the universe. "I'd have given a lot to have seen it."

Helen lifted her gaze to his. It was heavy with the pang of that unforgettable flight. "Oh, Harry, I wouldn't mind anything if we hadn't run away!"

"What'd you care? I'll bet there aren't any other three girls in town who'd have stayed as long as you did! I'll bet"—conviction swept him on—"I'll bet there aren't any three fellows who'd have stayed longer."

Helen walked on, comforted. Harry's evident admiration warmed her. She wondered what he would have said if she had not run. She was not old enough to know that he liked her better for having run.

What Harry said next brought her abruptly to earth again.

"Say, what made you girls go to see that hermit?"

"Oh, we wanted to."

"Curiosity?"

"We were curious enough."

"Now you're hedging. What was the question Anne asked him?"

It had come at last.

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"Did Grace tell Phil what Anne asked him?"

Harry scratched his head. "Let me see, what did she say about that?"

If Grace had told, Harry would have had no difficulty in remembering. Helen turned frankly on him. "That's a secret, Harry," she said. "I can't tell you. That's why I didn't tell you before about our going to see the hermit. I couldn't tell you the reason. The whole point's in the reason. But I'll tell you this. It didn't work out as we hoped it would. We were—disappointed."

"Old codger didn't turn out to be the fellow you took him for?"

Helen jumped. "What makes you say that?"

"'Twon't hurt anybody to say it, I guess. Look here, want me to root out some more Frenches for you?"

"No, thank you. I'm awfully obliged, but—but—— Well, I don't believe it would do us any good to know about them now. We're going to—to let things happen of themselves for a while." Despondency was in her voice.

"All right," Harry said. "Any time you want the fellows to cut in and help, just let me know."

His willingness made it impossible not to imagine that some time there would be a chance for the fellows to help, and Helen's spirits lightened. Not that she wanted help; what she wanted was

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something definite to look forward to. Harry's tone implied that it waited around the corner, so to speak, and the tone, fully as much as the words, cheered her.

Moreover, it was exceedingly hard for Helen's despondency to withstand the fortnight that opened before her. She could never remember her woes when her hands touched a basket-ball. Anne did not play. The fact that Anne cared nothing for the game always remained a mystery to Helen. Gay delighted in it, and the squad of high school girls who played basket-ball in the gymnasium improvised from a big brick barn had chosen Gay as captain of "the team." Who besides Gay would secure places among the five chosen to do battle for their school still remained an unsettled problem in the captain's mind. Grace was out of the running from lack of practice, and Mary Tracy and Helen were the only possibilities in the ranks of F. O. C. Beyond F. O. C. a few lights emerged, shining more or less dimly. May Rhodes was one of the brighter luminaries. Gay had no intention of putting any girl on the team or keeping any girl off, simply for the reason that she was a friend of hers. Sport and friendship with Gay were two entirely different propositions.

"It doesn't matter whether you like somebody or not," she told the girls gathered on the gymna-

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sium floor, "you can play with her just the same. It's how well she plays that counts in basket-ball, not how fond she is of you. I'll tell you right now that you people did a rash thing in putting me in to run this basket-ball business. You'll want to throw me out a dozen times before the game is played. Maybe you'll want to mob me to-night. But I've done the best I knew how in picking the team and, if I've made mistakes, and I presume I have, it's because I didn't know enough not to. Whoever picked the team, you'd think was blind in both eyes, so it might as well be G. Flint. Now I'm going to read you the names, and then we'll line up against a second team that is mighty near as good as the first. Those of you who aren't satisfied can just buck up in your play and knock a few of the rest of us off the first team into the second before we have another game. Why yes, Gracie, I'm expecting to play a game at Racefield with Racefield some day. Aren't you? Now this is the team that's to play Racefield next week. I'll not apologize for being on it myself. Center, Gay Flint. Forwards, May Rhodes and Helen Thayer. Guards, Spud Tracy and Jane Larkins."

Helen, straining her ears for the names, felt the blood rush into her face as her name was read. She had wanted to hear it, but had feared as much

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as she had hoped. Now she looked across the floor to the "little red-headed thing" and smiled happily. May Rhodes smiled back. May Rhodes liked to play quite as well as did Helen.

"I was sure of you," Helen said to her as they lined up.

"I wasn't," May Rhodes told her. "But I knew you'd get on."

"It scares me to think of next week," said Helen.

"Then don't think," returned May Rhodes. "I'm trying not to. Does anybody know how they play?"

"Estelle Lawrence has a friend who says they've got a dandy goal thrower," Helen remarked.

"That looks bad," the red-haired girl said. "We're none of us sure. Oh, we make a basket now and then, enough to look decent, but ——"

"Get ready to play," Gay called. "Throw up the ball and call fouls, will you, Sally? I expect they have a regular coach at Racefield."

"Yes, they have," said Estelle.

"You call fouls too, Estelle. Now, everybody get busy and do your best."

It was impossible to resist the tide of enthusiasm that swept over the high school girls in the following fortnight. Helen did not try to resist it. She let it bear her up out of the depths of disappoint-

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ment and chagrin into which the hermit episode had cast her and float her high on a flood of joyful anticipation. That the home team might not win she acknowledged with her lips; more than once in speech with her fellows Helen waxed eloquent on the subject of avoiding over-confidence. As a matter of fact in her deepest soul, quite unrecognized for what it was by Helen herself, the certainty remained that Racefield would be beaten. In her day-dreams, and in the midst of her busy-ness Helen found moments for day-dreams, the fate of the game long hung uncertain, but in the end victory invariably perched on Gay's banners.

And she was busy. There was a costume to be made, since Gay's team had voted to appear all in white with the school red for its only color. There were songs to be heard and approved; now and then there was a halting line to be put straight, when her aid was besought by a worried author. There were half-hours in the gymnasium-barn while Helen and May Rhodes took turns throwing—or missing—the basket. Moreover, school continued with maddening regularity.

"The teachers act," Grace complained, "as though they thought we had nothing to do but learn the lessons they give out. I don't believe they know there's to be any game at all."

"Oh, yes, they do," Gay assured her. "Mr.

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Staples has a test in his mind for the day after. Just wait and see."

Gay was wrong about the date. Mr. Staples announced the test for the day itself.

"Just as if we hadn't anything on our minds but his old Catiline!" Estelle wailed.

"Oh, well, we'll live through it," said Gay.

Helen groaned with the rest, but when the day approached, to her amazement she found herself almost glad of the test. It kept her mind off the game. The nearer it came the more fearful of it Helen grew. It was actually a relief to put her mind on Catiline and see how long she could keep it there. That in itself made a kind of game and Helen played it obstinately.

Then the day itself. The test passed, and everybody was alive afterward, though not all were happy. Dinner went by in a kind of fevered dream. In a dream Helen dressed and Anne stopped for her and they walked to the gymnasium together. Helen's hands were dry and hot and her tongue felt parched.

"Oh, Anne!" she said, "I—I'm scared."

"Why?" asked Anne curiously. "It's only a game."

"Afterward maybe you'll see why," Helen told her.

Afterward Anne saw.

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The nerves of the girls in the dressing room drew taut as a stretched rope. May Rhodes's cheeks were so pale that her freckles showed like a fine dust sprinkled on her skin. Jane Larkins laughed incessantly. Helen's shaking fingers fumbled at the hooks of her skirt until she wondered whether she should ever get it off. Mary Tracy was unwontedly silent. Gay talked a little too much in the extravagant style Gay affected in moments of exhilaration.

"I wish it were over," May Rhodes murmured to Helen.

She nodded. "Did you suppose it was going to be like this?"

"Not I. I thought it would be fun."

"It isn't fun."

"Cheer up!" Gay addressed them. "The other team is feeling just as bad."

"They've played before."

"That doesn't make any difference. You'll get over it when you begin to play."

"If I could only be sure of that!" May whispered.

Grace bounced into the room.

"Oh! Oh! You cuties! Line up and let me look at you. Racefield won't be half as good-looking as you. I'll tell you that right now."

"Pretty is as pretty plays," remarked Mary.

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Nevertheless, the temperature of the room moderated slightly. Each of the five surveyed the four white figures within her line of vision and even in her misery realized that the effect was undeniably pleasing.

Gay swept Grace an extravagant bow.

"It's some consolation to look pretty," she announced. "Allow me, Miss Howe, to tender you the grateful appreciation of the Saybrook High's embattled bunch of basket-ballers, and to assure you of our intention to live up to the standard set by our clothes. They may shine less dazzlingly a little later in the day, but we trust they'll be covered with glory as well as grime. Where's our mascot?"

"Judith's finishing him. We didn't want to get him fixed too soon lest he should spoil himself."

"Are the Racefield girls ready?"

"I think so. Their bunch up-stairs is ready, anyway. Talk about banners! They brought along one big enough to wrap the barn in. It's stuck up on the wall on their side. Twenty of 'em. Good bunch. And they can sing. They ——"

Gay brushed by the garrulous Grace. Through the door left open behind her descended from the floor above a sound of chanting, strongly accented, booming rhythmically. It brought into their

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throats the hearts of the four white-suited figures that remained. It quickened the pulse of one, lifting her head with a swift zest of conflict; it doused another with alternate waves of heat and cold; steadied the nerves of a third; flurried a fourth.

Gay was again in the room, her back to the door; the captain, cool, commanding, quiet. "Now remember what I've told you over and over; no gallery plays. Team work. Keep in mind you're five parts of one team. *One team.* If anybody tries to be the whole show, I'll put her off the floor and use a substitute. Don't play like five—play like one, but each of you remember that you're not that one. You're a fifth of one. Now come on out and meet the Racefield girls."

A minute later the five stood eye to eye with their opponents. Silently each team measured the other, while tongues murmured names and exchanged unheeded greetings. "Such fun you could come!" "It's so jolly to play with girls we don't know." "I suppose you have a better place than this. It's rather funny, because it used to be a barn." "Are you guard? I'm a forward. I wonder ——"

Feet ascending the crooked stairs. A growing din racketing out from the main floor fringed with its clamorous spectators protected by netting from

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the playing field. A group of blue-suited figures tugging to hold back a straining dog, as they swept out on the empty floor. A cheer that dwarfed previous cheers. A song that rose, snappy and sharp —

“ Racefield, Racefield,
Watch the game we play.
For it's the team of Racefield
Will surely win the day.
Racefield, Racefield,
Dashing, sure, and fleet.
So raise a cheer for Racefield,
The team that can't be beat.”

And then Helen, her heart pounding, felt herself moving mechanically out into that vast empty space, which wasn't at all vast, as she very well knew in ordinary moments, but which now looked illimitable to her nervous eyes. Five red ribbons ran forward from an entrancing little red cart in which sat Johnny, his fat arms trying vainly to circle a sphere of pigskin, his bright black eyes vainly trying to see over its top, his happy baby chuckle gurgling up like a hidden rivulet of joy from underneath. The end of one of the red ribbons rested in Helen's hand. The ends of the other four were clutched by her team-mates.

They made a captivating picture as they ran on the floor drawing the merry baby, the five piquant figures clothed in spotless white from the flare of

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their caps to the flat of their shoes, relieved only by the red lacings of their jumpers and the rosettes of red at their knees. A little "a-a-h" of delight met them. Then the home supporters rose to their feet and inundated their dainty champions and quenched Johnny's blithe chuckle with a torrent of song.

"Come, come, here they come,
Saybrook takes the floor.
Gay, May, Spud, Helen, Jane,
Oh, they'll pile up the score.
'Rah-rah-rah-rah-rah !
Lift the cheer along.
Soon you'll hear while Saybrook
Shouts its victory song."

Gay removed the ball from Johnny's person, and while Judith proudly bore the mascot to a place of safety behind the sheltering netting and quick hands retired the cart, Gay snapped the ball to Spud, Spud passed it to Helen, and Helen, turning, lifted it in a swift curve toward the nearest basket. The ball dropped through the white meshes and a cheer rose from the watching walls. The ball zigzagged again in practice down the floor. Helen's eyes followed its passage. The minute her hands closed on its grimy surface trepidation had left her. She was quiet, cool, steady.

CHAPTER VIII

A GAME AND WHAT CAME OF IT

“DON’T look at the audience,” Gay had told her team. “Watch the ball—follow that.”

For just one minute Helen forgot. There seemed to be at that minute nothing else particularly worth doing. The visitors were warming up with the ball and the spectators were making a great deal of noise. It would, of course, be silly not to look at them—just once. But Helen wished she hadn’t. It made her feel queer again—queerer than she had felt before. Hastily she turned her eyes back to the Racefield team. How deftly and easily they passed! How skilfully they shot those long sure goals! How workmanlike they looked in their trim blue suits! Helen smoothed her own white knees nervously. She knew she was “cute”; hadn’t Grace said so? She hoped, oh how she hoped, she could play. If they would only begin and give her something to do. And let that blessed ball take away once more this palpitating expectancy.

The Racefield captain won the toss and chose

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the north basket. It happened to be Helen's favorite, and she had hoped to begin the game under its friendly auspices. Never mind, it would fall to her lot next half. She walked quietly to the post of right forward. There stood a small pigtailed girl with dreamy blue eyes and a square chin. Helen and the pigtailed girl took stock of each other under cover of a nod of greeting. Pigtail put out her hand and the two shook with grave ceremony.

In the middle of the floor the referee waited, ball in hand. The two centers faced each other, poised for the jump. Gay's head towered above the Racefield player's. Gay, Helen reflected, need not jump very far; the ball could not fail to go whither she chose to bat it. The songs had fallen silent around the hall; the spectators were leaning forward in hushed anticipation. Helen felt them, though she looked no more. Then their presence faded from her consciousness, as the ball rose in the center. The referee's whistle cut the stillness and the ball dropped.

Gay cuffed it to Helen. Helen's hands closed lovingly about its gritty skin. She wheeled on one foot and shot for the home goal. The right hand wall arose and jiggled dizzily up and down. It stamped and clapped and shouted. It wrenched red streamers from parallel bars and waved them

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feverishly. It rioted in a frenzy of joy. The home team had scored in the first minute of play. Saybrook spirits soared.

Helen stooped to tie a shoe lace. It did not need tying, but she must do something with this din in her ears.

“Rah, rah, rah! Thayer, *Thayer*, THAYER!”

“Oh, Helen, bully for you!”

The girl did not glance toward the sounds. She felt happy and shy and elated and afraid, all together.

“Good shot,” said the pigtailed girl, and smiled.

“Thank you,” Helen smiled back.

The referee lifted her hand for silence and the ball went up again in the center. Again Gay struck it sharply toward her right forward. But now between Helen and the pigskin interposed a swift body. The dreamy-eyed girl jumped with palm uplifted, rapped the ball down smartly out of the air, shot it behind her, darted forward, received it again, and before Saybrook knew what had happened the ball was zigzagging quietly down the field toward the visitors' goal. In vain Gay reached for it; in vain Spud ducked for it. The ball was never at a given moment quite where, apparently, at that very moment it had been going to be. Racefield's left forward swung it above her head, while in front of her Jane Larkins executed

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a superior imitation of a windmill under the influence of a cyclone. But the ball went in. It swept to the basket like a homing bird and without a second's doubt dropped through.

The yellow supporters arose in their turn and endeavored to express how they felt about it.

Helen smiled at the pigtailed girl. "That was a splendid play."

The pigtailed girl smiled back.

"This time," Helen said to herself, "she shall not jump in like that."

But this time Gay did not strike into Helen's territory. Gay felt that a change was desirable and aimed for May Rhodes. May had her own ideas in regard to the proper course of the ball after it left Gay's hand, but so, as it proved, had May's guard. May's guard frustrated her intentions, and Racefield again superintended the ball's progress down the field. When the visitors had it exactly where they wanted it, somebody put it in the basket.

The yellow wall made everybody aware of the fact that this was what it had come expecting to witness. The Saybrook team looked surprised.

Helen smiled, but said nothing.

The whistle shrilled and Gay gave May Rhodes another chance. It looked to the Racefield guard like her chance, and she proceeded to make it hers.

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The other four Racefield players took up the guard's pass and continued to pass as uninterruptedly as though they had the field to themselves. At the end of the pass somebody threw a goal. It appeared to be the custom.

Helen smiled at the pigtailed girl. It was not a hilariously happy smile. A smile cannot be particularly hilarious when you are conscious of a sickening sensation in your chest. The fact was, Helen did not know how to stop smiling. She had begun the game with a smile. If she ceased to smile the dreamy-eyed girl would see that she didn't like being beaten, and it was bad enough to be beaten without knowing that other people knew how bad you were finding it. To let them see would be unendurable.

Gay tried Helen again. Helen caught the signal and fell back negligently. Then she jumped. Dreamy-Eyes jumped quicker and did all and more than all that she had done before.

The score stood eight to two.

"You seem to know how to play," Helen said steadily. There was a lump in her throat, but she spoke the words clearly.

"Thank you," said her guard modestly.

But now Gay decided that Racefield must work harder if it would add points to its score. Gay had been learning the ways of Racefield within the

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last ten minutes of play, and what Gay learned she always liked to practice. Helen, too, had been making up her mind to a white-hot point of determination. The girl with the dreamy eyes should not lay hands on the next ball that came their way. And she didn't. Helen snapped it from under her very nose, threw it to Gay and dropped back toward the home goal. Gay tried an overhead pass. Dreamy-Eyes shot up like a Jack-in-the-box and stopped it. Then the machine began again. Saybrook groaned. But Gay was in action now. Gay's long brown hands played the mischief with the machine. Saybrook took heart of grace.

"They're getting into the game again," said the red wall. The yellow wall waited confidently.

Spud also was getting into the game. Spud had a quiet way of sizing up an opponent. After a girl had played for ten minutes there was very little in that girl's style of play that Spud did not know about. Spud's opponent began to find this out now. She began to suspect a determination on Spud's part to let her make no more goals. The suspicion was perfectly well founded. The Race-field forward's counter-determination to frustrate Spud's plan was less so. Spud was a person difficult to dodge and impossible to outrun. Little, and quick as a spider, she was always first at the ball. Moreover, Spud had discovered that the

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Racefield forward was not equally adroit at swinging to right and to left. She preferred to make a catch on the right. Thereafter Spud forced her to do it on the left, or else high in the air. Spud's opponent was half a head taller than Spud and Racefield found it wise in her case to abandon low balls for high. Sometimes the machine, in the moments of smooth going still left to it, swerved altogether from Spud's territory. The easier road to the visitors' basket lay through Jane Larkins.

Jane did her best, but Jane had neither Spud's head nor Spud's uncanny quickness and certainty of hand. Jane sometimes fumbled. Spud, never. Racefield learned this and endeavored to turn its information to practical account. In the effort the visitors encountered Gay again. Having mastered the devious ways of her own opponent, Gay undertook to reinforce Jane. This gave her plenty to do, but she liked it.

In spite of Saybrook's best efforts, Racefield put in two more balls. May Rhodes put in one. The first half ended with a score of twelve to four.

"There's no use talking," Jane Larkins said gloomily. "We're beaten already."

"Never say that till the game's over," Spud urged.

"What if we are beaten?" May Rhodes demanded. "I don't feel half as bad about it as I

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thought I should. We can make 'em work hard for their victory."

The team, sucking lemons assiduously, nodded with emphasis.

"That's the talk," said Gay. "Buck up, girls, and lead 'em a life this half. Smash their old pass system. It's their team work that's put the score where it is now. Team for team, they haven't as good single players as we have, but they play right into each other's hands. If we could do that, I'd show 'em!"

Helen hugged her knees. "I don't think Estelle's friend is so very good."

"Reason why," chuckled Gay. "Spud here won't let her show off."

"I know how she feels." Helen's sigh came from shoes that were now no longer white. "That girl with pigtails is in my way every minute. She sticks like a burr, and I can't shake her."

Just here Grace and Estelle appeared and fell upon the team with open arms.

"My, but we're proud of the way you're standing up to them!"

"If you *could* just put in a few more goals ——"

"They expected a walkover after the first five minutes. Thought you'd gone all to pieces. Every time Bess reaches for that ball and it isn't there, I could hug you, Spuddy!"



“WE CAN MAKE ’EM WORK HARD”

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"They're a pretty fine team, Stella."

"Oh, they are, Gay. But they're getting a surprise. Surprises are good for people."

"We got a surprise all right. They're outplaying us."

"They're not, either!" Grace cried. "I mean, don't let them. Everybody can see how much more practice they've had, of course—loads more. They've had a coach and we haven't. They know ——"

Gay cut in. "The team's going to take what's coming to us, Gracie, without squealing. See that you girls do the same. They are a better team, and you might as well say so squarely, without hedging. If there's one thing I hate it is to hear people always making excuses. The fact is, Racefield has got us, if not where they want us, at least where we don't want to be. We'll do the best we can for you in this next half, but we couldn't promise to beat that bunch without more practice, if our lives depended on it."

"You don't mean, Gay Flint," Grace ejaculated, "that you have told our team we can't win! That's a funny thing to do."

"I'm telling 'em," Gay returned calmly, "that we can't win without playing better than we've played yet. Oh, there's a chance. There's always a chance. A game is never won till it's done."

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But the thing for us to fight for is to keep their score down. Another day —— Well, we'll see."

The hearts of the team steadied under this plain speaking. If their last golden dream of a miraculous winning score were shattered by it, they acquired at the same time a definite program within their reach.

The Racefield team seemed also to have acquired something. Their determined air as they took the floor again would have worried less stubborn opponents. But Saybrook had gone through its baptism of publicity. It had learned the sight, touch, taste, hearing of an audience. It was now ready to concentrate its attention entirely on its play.

"That girl," Helen said to herself, as she took her place under her favorite basket, "is not going to get any more of the balls Gay means for me."

"That girl's" chin indicated that there might be two opinions about this. Helen's triumphed first. Her hands closed on the ball Gay batted toward the home goal. Too well guarded to risk a shot for the basket, she returned the ball to Gay and feinted a run to the right. Dreamy-Eyes sprang back a second too late; the ball was safe again in Helen's hands. But it missed the basket. That gave May Rhodes's guard a chance to capture it. She sped it toward Dreamy-Eyes, but Helen

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intercepted the pass and shot the ball to May. This play was not down on the program of May's guard, who for half a second was caught napping. In that half second May lifted the ball home.

Once more the ball went up in the center. Saybrook attempted to repeat its performance, but Dreamy-Eyes interrupted the return from Gay to Helen and tried a trick on her own account. She feinted to snap to May's guard and suddenly tossed the ball behind her into space that became magically occupied by the Racefield center. Gay, deluded for an instant, turned to see the ball leave her opponent's hands. Instantly Gay was in motion. The trouble was, she could not put herself out of action as quickly as she had got in.

"Foul on Saybrook for running with the ball."

Racefield missed the free throw, but Spud's opponent thought to make up for it by a goal from the field. Both girls jumped.

"Tie ball," said the umpire.

The Racefield forward batted smartly toward her team-mate, but here Jane Larkins became busy. Jane was beginning to get "warmed up," as she put it. From Jane the ball traveled toward Gay. Before it reached her Racefield dashed in. In the brisk *mêlée* that ensued Jane captured it again and tried an overhead pass. Racefield jumped, but Gay's long arms had the ball safe.

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May Rhodes missed the goal and the pigskin started back once more toward the visitors' basket. Racefield fouled and Gay handed the ball to Helen.

"You try it."

Helen took her place on the fifteen foot line and poised the ball in her hands. She held it lightly, breast high, carelessly as it seemed, the tips of her fingers pressing its leather sides. A sudden twist of her wrists and the ball sped upward and settled, to the din of a jubilant astonished shout, into the basket.

"I didn't think it was going in," said the pig-tailed girl under cover of the noise. "Nobody did. How on earth did you do it?"

"Why I——" Helen began. Then she jumped for the ball and snapped it to Gay. The next thing she knew, she and Dreamy-Eyes and the ball were wound up together in a mysterious knot.

"Tie ball!" reiterated the umpire.

Dreamy-Eyes batted it. Helen had known she would. But Gay's hands closed on it and in the next minute May Rhodes had thrown a goal.

The Saybrook supporters were jubilant. Twelve to nine, and ten minutes more to play. They saw rainbows.

But now Racefield managed to put the machine in motion again. Perhaps for a few minutes Say-

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brook relaxed the desperation of its defense. Perhaps no defense of Saybrook's could have withstood Racefield. Whatever the reason, the visitors made two more goals while Saybrook darted and jumped and lunged and grabbed and wondered why its agility was all to no purpose.

On the next toss-up May Rhodes got the ball straight from Gay's hand, but lost it in a try for the basket. Saybrook fouled again and this time Racefield made its goal by the hands of Spud's opponent. For two precious succeeding minutes the ball appeared unable to stay with either school for more than five seconds. It sped erratically back and forth while the sands of the game ran swiftly.

Breath was coming fast now. Chests were heaving. Each side struggled to hold its opponent to the score as it stood. Automatically, as it seemed to Helen, she jumped with the pigtailed girl, ran with her, dodged with her. Pigtails was never absent. Then suddenly Helen found herself, ball in hand, in a clear space near the side-lines, quite too near the side-lines. Voices in her ears were calling, "Shoot!" "Shoot!" There was no obstinate chin jigging up and down before her eyes. Quicker than thought Helen swung the ball above her head. From her hands it sped straight for the home goal, struck the further rim

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of the basket, staggered for one heart-clutching second and settled down within the white meshes.

A minute later the timekeeper's whistle sounded.

Saybrook streamed out on the floor and embraced its champions. Racefield was performing the same rite for the victors.

"Seventeen to eleven—that's not a bad beat!" Sally was saying.

"It isn't anything to what I thought it would be," Estelle acknowledged.

"Aren't you proud of them! Oh, aren't you *proud* of them!" Grace squealed to Anne. "I've got to hug you for that last goal, Helen."

She capped the act to the word.

"I wanted us to beat!" Anne cried.

"Wait till next time," Gay said hurriedly. "All ready, girls? Now then. What's the matter with Racefield?"

Quick barked the answer, "*They're all right!*"

"*Who's all right?*"

"*Racefield! Racefield!*"

At the door of the dressing room down-stairs the dreamy-eyed girl stopped Helen. "You're all right, too," she said. "I want to tell you that goal you made on the free throw—oh, the other one was splendid enough—but the free throw was the prettiest basket I ever saw anybody make. Not even excepting Jack French."

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"Jack French?"

"He used to star for the boys at home. Left school before Christmas. Now he's down here in Saybrook. Know him?"

Helen shook her head.

"I can tell you Racefield hated to lose him. He knows how to play. Hope we'll come up against each other again some day. Glad to have met you. Good-bye."

Helen repeated the conversation to Anne that evening. "Did you ever hear of a boy named Jack French?"

"No," said Anne. "But the other girls may have. We will ask them to-morrow."

"Let's not," Helen demurred. "Let's try Gay's way. Let's wait for Jack French to happen along of himself."

CHAPTER IX

NOT EXACTLY AN UNCLE

SAYBROOK lost no time in challenging Racefield to a second game. The team wasted no breath in regrets or protestations, but settled to work to bring up its team play to the point where, as Gay said, "it could be seen if you were looking for it."

The second game came off at Racefield toward the end of March.

"Take Johnny?" Judith echoed Gay's question. "What do you think Johnny's mother'd say to that? If I was to ask her could I take Johnny to Racefield to help beat in a game, she'd think I was crazy. And I don't know as I'd blame her much either."

"Then we'll have to use Fritz," said Gay. "Johnny's our principal mascot. Fritz is our second. Agree, Stella?"

"If you won't let Racefield's big collie eat him up, and will hold his paw if he's frightened."

"Come along and hold it yourself," Gay had retorted.

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Ten girls and a spaniel puppy accompanied the team to Racefield. F. O. C. went in a body, with the exception of Judith, who stayed at home with the principal mascot. Estelle furnished not only the acting mascot but her father's machine as well. Mary Tracy's father took his five passenger and combined a business trip with the girls' pleasure. Mr. Lathrop ordered a big touring car from a downtown garage and told Anne to put it at the disposal of the team. The girls who did not go made the three cars gay with bunting and red pennants.

"Racefield ought to know when you get there," one of them said. "Paint the town red, girls."

"We'll paint the game red," Grace cried, running about from car to car to make sure that nobody was about to be left behind. "All right." She waved an assuring hand, and mounted to the front seat of the first car, where her jaunty red hat soon looked like a flying bird. The girls gathered on the high school steps and clapped and cheered as the bright little procession rolled off; the boys on the streets that the cars sped through lifted their caps and shouted. It was an exciting departure. It made Helen feel as she had always longed to feel, like a soldier going out to action.

Late March had drawn the frost from the ground without as yet quite settling the roads. They were not as bad as they had been two weeks earlier, nor

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yet as good as they would be later. Mud and water flew from the tires and a boisterous March wind buffeted the girls' faces. Who cared? It was fun to swing through the streets and watch heads turn curiously, fun to wave at friends, smile at all, and laugh inextinguishably at jokes that could hardly have stood alone had the jokers been on foot and bound for no game with Racefield. It was fun to bump along the country roads; to whiz past farmhouses and see the farmer and his boys stop their work and stand gazing, agape at the brilliant cars; to slow up, tooting, for the run past a crossroads schoolhouse just disgorging its staring scholars; to slip quietly by a horse-drawn buggy plodding stupidly. It was more fun still—but oh, what unbelievably brief fun!—to spin, horns screaming, into Racefield, to draw up one after another in front of the high school, to jump out under the strange gaze of curious eyes, and be conducted to dressing rooms and gymnasium, the destination according with whether one were player or rooter.

It was all fun, but the game was the most fun, that worth while type of fun that results from energy and desire, trained muscle and firm will, working together toward a given end. Gay's team had come up with one purpose, and nobody had any attention to spare for side issues. The fact

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that they really looked very well failed to elicit comment even from Grace Howe. Moreover, from the first minute of play Saybrook found itself able to do some of the things which it set out to do.

The baffled five who had struggled in the barn against Racefield had held their ground by force of individual initiative. The result of a given play surprised the team-mates of the girl who made it quite as much as it surprised the enemy. Nobody knew exactly what Saybrook was going to do next, least of all Saybrook itself. To-day there were two machines on the floor. When Spud laid hands on the ball, her team-mates had a fair idea of what might happen in the next two minutes. If you think that this turned the game into a stupid cut-and-dried affair, you are wrong. There was, please remember, the other team. And the other team had no intention of letting Saybrook have its own way about anything, if Racefield could prevent it.

The result was a game that kept the spectators' hearts in their throats most of the time. Back and forth the ball journeyed, shepherded now by blue suits, now by white. At intervals it rose toward a basket, sometimes to fall back fruitlessly, sometimes to drop home amid tumultuous cheers. The score mounted, seesawing monotonously. Four to two. Four to four. Six to four. Six to five. Seven to nine. Nine to nine.

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Around the gallery rail girls pressed forward, palpitating with fearful hope. Those standing hung over the shoulders of those sitting down. Throats grew hoarse; mouths parched. On the floor faces set in grimmer determination. Nerves drew taut. Play was speeding faster now, less steadily. Knots of three or four drew toward the ball and scattered only to bunch again.

The referee's whistle blew.

"Tie ball."

Helen drew back. The Racefield captain looked at May Rhodes. Then she looked at the referee. Her cheeks flashed, her eyes dilated. "There were three players' hands on the ball." She spoke to the referee.

That official hesitated.

Gay strolled over.

"There were," insisted the Racefield captain.

The referee consulted with the umpire.

"Saybrook fouled," insisted the Racefield captain. "I was here. I saw them."

"The officials noted no foul," said the referee.

"They did. They fouled." The Racefield player's eyes glittered. She looked as though the next minute she might cry. Gay observed her curiously. The Racefield captain, she knew, had no desire to cry. She was merely excited. But Gay wondered whether she would cry.

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"I thought Helen took her hands off before you put yours on," Saybrook's captain remarked.

"No, she didn't. It was a foul."

"Let it go, Jess," whispered a Racefield player.

"She did. She fouled."

"Play ball! Play ball!" called the galleries.

"Tie ball," repeated the referee.

With lightning rapidity Helen's brain ran off a film of those pictures which are the bane and joy of the imaginative girl. She saw Estelle's friend Bess throwing a free goal. She saw Racefield tumultuously rejoicing over a victory won by a single point. "I can't—oh, I can't!" she thought despairingly. But her feet carried her across the floor to Gay. Her lips spoke steadily while her heart dropped into her rubber-soled shoes.

"I'm afraid my hands were on the ball, too, Gay. I tried to take them off in time, but—but I couldn't."

Gay turned back to where the Racefield captain, her lips compressed, her eyes blazing, was slowly shifting so as to face her own basket. Gay said a word to the referee apologetically. The referee lowered the ball, glanced toward Helen, approached her, asked a question.

"Yes," said Helen. A miserable sense of shame, of foreboding, enveloped her. She spoke huskily, but she looked the official in the eyes honestly.

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"My hands were on the ball, too, just for a second."

The referee raised her voice. "Foul on Saybrook. Three at the ball."

She handed the ball to the Racefield captain. The girl turned toward Gay. "Thank you," she said. "And you," her nod seemed to address Helen.

Applause started at one corner of the gallery. Racefield took it up, as understanding grew. It rattled along the seats in a volley of hand-clapping. Helen did not heed. She actually failed to hear the tribute of the galleries. All her soul was centered on the ball, which the Racefield forward was carrying toward the fifteen foot line. Now she poised it for the throw. She would make it. Helen had no hopes on that score. She could not fail to make it. Helen felt cold all over, cold and numb and a little sick. The ball rose in a swift beautiful curve and dropped through the meshes. Ten to nine in favor of Racefield, and it was her doing. If she hadn't fouled—oh, if she hadn't fouled! Why had she told that she had fouled?

The game continued on its deadly round. Try as she would, Helen found no chance to score. A dreadful feeling of nervousness palsied her muscles. Saybrook was beaten, and through her fault. Desperately she struggled against the weakening

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certainty that assailed her. She must not think of defeat; already the dreamy-eyed girl had captured the ball under her very eyes. She must throw off this fear that made her impotent. She must play as she had played at first, only better, far better than she had played at first. All the resolution that was in her Helen put at the service of the game.

She was playing automatically, using eye and hand and foot by the instinct bred of steady practice. She was half conscious that the pigtailed girl jumped and ducked and ran beside her, but now Helen's were the hands that closed on the ball. How much time was there? Oh, to make one more goal! Under Dreamy-Eyes' arm she sped the ball back to Gay, but still her guard pursued her. Could she never get free, not for one single second? The ball hurtled overhead. Helen jumped and brought it down, landing squarely. Dreamy-Eyes turned into an octopus, bristling with waving arms. In desperation Helen passed the sphere to her team-mate. The ball shot upward from May Rhodes's hands, and Helen's desire shot with it. "In! in! in!" she was thinking. "Oh, you beauty, go in!"

Exultation throbbed for a moment in Helen's heart.

After that she thought of nothing except to be

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ready to get the ball from Gay's hand when it should rise again between the jumping centers. There was no telling what might happen if Dreamy-Eyes touched it first. To get the ball and put it in the basket if she could, and ——

The timekeeper's whistle shrilled across the quiet floor. The scorer stepped forward.

"Eleven to ten in favor of Saybrook."

The dreamy-eyed girl was shaking Helen's hand. "You're a good sport," she was saying. "That score belongs to your bunch all right. You whipped us square."

Helen scarcely heard her, she was so eager to get her hands on May Rhodes. Grace was ahead of her. Grace was hugging the red-headed girl as fervently as though she were her dearest friend returned from six months of absence. Hands seized Helen herself. Arms enveloped her ecstatically.

"Oh, Helen! Helen! *Helen!*" cried Anne.

Other arms reached around Anne's.

"You've got the wrong one!" Helen told them.

"It isn't me you want. It's May Rhodes."

They continued to hug her. They hugged the whole team impartially.

"I could cry, I'm so happy," Grace dabbed at her eyes with a scrap of linen. "That, Gay? Oh, that's my handkerchief—what's left of it. I tore it to shreds, I was so excited. When May

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Rhodes threw that last goal I nearly strangled the Racefield girl who sat next me. At least Sally says I did. I don't remember."

"What's the color of her hair now?" Gay whispered slyly.

"Color of whose hair?"

"May Rhodes's."

"Oh, hers—it's pure gold."

The team descended to the dressing rooms borne on a stream of jubilation. The girls dressed hastily while the rooters lined the walls and chanted pæans.

"It was a perfectly splendid game!" breathed Sally.

"I thought I'd die, you kept us in such suspense!" Grace exclaimed. "I'm as limp as a rag now."

"Bess says we're the fairest bunch they ever played against, that nobody could find a thing to criticise."

"I should hope not," declared Gay, "after Helen called a foul on herself."

"Was that what happened?" cried Estelle. "We saw Helen had done something nice. Oh, we clapped, too, but we weren't quite sure what we were clapping for."

"They didn't clap for that!" Helen was incredulous.

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"Indeed they did," Mary said. "Where were your ears, Nell?"

"But why? I had fouled. I knew I had."

"Nobody else knew it," Gay told her, "except the Racefield captain. She thought she was going to miss a free throw that belonged to her and my, wasn't she mad! But I'm glad you spoke up, Helen. Of course it wasn't very regular. You're never supposed to dispute the referee's decision. I hate a scrapping game. But just this once I'm glad we weren't regular. If they hadn't had that throw nobody on their team would ever have thought the game belonged to us."

"What I was afraid of was that we wouldn't win," Helen confessed. "If we hadn't made that last basket ——"

"Then we'd have lost fairly," Gay insisted.

Helen quaked. She remembered how overwhelmingly she had longed to hold her tongue.

"I'm glad I wasn't in your shoes, Helen," May Rhodes said. "I'm afraid I'd have kept still."

"I wanted to," Helen confessed. She felt suddenly tremulous, as one who has swayed toward a precipice and been snatched back to safety.

The three motor cars were waiting at the high school door. Racefield was also waiting to send the visitors home with a cheer. As Helen, on the front seat of the hired car, settled the rug about

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her feet, she noticed two boys talking with the driver. They moved away as she straightened up.

"Ta-ta, Jack. Come again."

Then the machines were off.

Tongues flew in the big touring car. Helen nearly dislocated her neck in the effort to hear and talk, too. After a while she gave it up and faced forward. Beside her the chauffeur drove steadily, his eyes on the road. Helen watched the cars ahead for a few minutes. It amused her to see how even a distance they kept from each other. Then she glanced at the chauffeur.

Beyond ascertaining that he was no one whom she knew, Helen had hitherto given him scant attention. He was young, about Floyd's age; she decided, and strictly intent on his business. Leaning back comfortably in her warm wrappings, the girl watched his gauntleted hands idly. His face, reddened by the March wind, turned neither to right nor left. The profile was clean cut, strong; the lips, firm-set.

A shower of muddy drops splashed against the wind shield and Helen jumped.

"Sorry," said the boy beside her. "There wasn't anything to do but go through it."

"I didn't mind," Helen answered. "It surprised me, that's all."

Silence for a minute. Then he spoke again.

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"You're the girl who owned to having fouled, aren't you? That was a little bit of all right. Hope you don't mind my saying so."

Helen turned squarely toward him in astonishment. "How did you know?"

"I saw the end of the game."

"You saw the end of the game? How?"

"From the trophy room. Another fellow and I were in there. Nobody put us out. I used to play a bit myself. Good game."

She stared. Recollections crowded swiftly. Nonsense! Nevertheless two and two make four, and Helen was apt at jumping at conclusions. She jumped now.

"Did you live in Racefield until lately?"

"Lived and went to school there all my life."

"Your name," said Helen swiftly, "is Jack French."

"It is," he flashed a look at her, "but how did you know?"

"I didn't. I mean I didn't know you were you. That girl I played against told me about you. She said a goal I threw in the other game was as pretty as the goals Jack French used to make."

The boy grinned. "It must have been a good-looker, then."

"She thought it was, but never mind that now. I want—— Oh, I want to ask you another ques-

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tion, and I'm afraid you'll think me impertinent."

"Fire away."

"Did you ever have any relatives who lived in Westport, Maine?"

The bolt was launched.

"Westport, Maine? That was where father's Uncle Eben had some third cousins. Father used to talk about it some. Visited 'em when he was a little tad living at Uncle Eben's. Why?"

"I—I just wanted to know," said Helen. Her gaze devoured the boy's face. Brown eyes under protecting goggles; brown hair under a visored cap. A sober, almost a stern look, except when something amused him, as the mention of his basket-making abilities had evidently amused him a moment since. And still the girl's gaze searched and studied. She was not yet satisfied.

"Would you mind my asking one more question?" It was a very small, timid voice.

"Depends on the question. Ask it and find out."

"Have you—a lot of brothers—and sisters?"

"No sisters. Four brothers. One of 'em's a baby—two years old. My father is dead—died last fall. I'm the wage-earner now. I do it this way." He indicated the machine. "That's why I left school and came to Saybrook. Racefield's

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all right, it's got things Saybrook hasn't—that gymnasium, for instance—but it's no place to earn money in. Too small, besides." He paused. "Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

Helen shrank back abashed. "Oh—I—I beg your pardon!"

He shot a look at her crimson face.

"Beg yours. Would you mind telling me why you asked all those questions?"

Helen thought swiftly. "I know a girl—she's a friend of mine, an orphan. Her people came from Westport, Maine, and her name is French. We've been trying to find some relatives for her. She likes big families, so we've been hoping for that kind. And she's never had any money, so we've wanted to find people with plenty of that."

The boy's smile was frankly grim. "Sorry for you. Nothing doing in that line here. Mother's an invalid. I'm going to move her and the kids down as soon as I find a way to manage it. Your friend will have to look further, I guess, for her outfit."

"An invalid! Oh, I'm so sorry."

The hardness in the boy's voice softened slightly. A third glance had shown him the girl's face warm with sympathy. "Her back," he explained. "It's mean luck, too. She's a nice little mother." Helen liked him when he said that. "And the

NOT EXACTLY AN UNCLE

kids are nice. The two oldest will have to stop school as soon as the law allows. That will be all right, if we can keep mother and the rest comfortable."

For a minute Helen forgot Judith as she had already forgotten the girls behind her.

"Tell me about them. That is, if you don't mind," she besought him.

"What were you and that good-looking chauffeur chinning so hard about?" Gay demanded of Helen, as the car sped away empty down Beech Street. "You didn't hear a word we said to you."

Helen turned a tragic face from Anne to Gay.

"I've found Judith's folks, and they're not a bit rich."

"You have found——" Anne's voice failed her.

"He was Jack French, Anne. He drives cars for a living."

"Our chauffeur, you mean?"

"Not exactly an uncle," said Gay imperturbably.

"They're poor," Helen reiterated. "Fearfully poor. What in the world shall we do?"

CHAPTER X

BREAKING THE NEWS

"THE first thing to do," Gay said, "is to call a meeting of F. O. C. I'll telephone Grace and Sally. You two notify Estelle and Spud. Tell 'em to come to your house—may we, Helen?—at half-past seven."

"What about Judith?"

"Most likely she couldn't come if we asked her and I'm not sure we want her yet. Are you?"

"I don't know," said Helen. "I'm all upset in my mind. It isn't a bit the way I wanted it to be."

"It's the way it is," said Anne.

In exclamatory dismay the girls who gathered that evening at Helen's house listened to Helen's story.

"My goodness, Helen," Grace exclaimed, "we'll never let you sit with the chauffeur again!"

"A boy with four brothers and a sick mother to support," sighed Estelle. "If that isn't the limit!"

"He was good-looking," Sally admitted.

"Good-looking!" Grace scorned her. "If he

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was the best looking boy in town he wouldn't do for a relative to Judith, fixed as he is."

"I'm not sure," Mary observed mildly, "but that he is the best looking boy in town. Only someway, he doesn't thrill me as much as the hermit did."

"Oh, that hermit!" Estelle's tone commingled disgust and regret in equal parts.

"Of course, the relationship isn't very close," Helen remarked.

"I should say not!" Grace cried. "This boy's great-uncle had some third cousins in Westport, Maine. What kind of relation does that make him to Judith?"

"We might call them fifth cousins," Gay meditated.

"Fifth! Who ever heard of fifth cousins? People always lose count at third."

"That's only if they have plenty of firsts and seconds, Gracie. If they haven't anybody nearer than a ninth cousin, I expect they count up to nine."

"But I thought we were looking for a great-uncle!" wailed Sally.

"Little mistake in nomenclature on our part," Gay told her. "What's in a name? It turns out we've been looking all the time for a fifth cousin."

"Well, we haven't!" Grace's pretty face was

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flushed. "We don't want any fifth cousins. We won't have 'em either! We want a great-uncle."

"We may have to take what we can get, Gracie."

Grace stamped her foot. "How can you talk like that, Gay? The idea, the very idea of hunting up a fifth cousin for Judith! As if she wanted a fifth cousin, with a dozen children and a sick mother to support, too!"

"We did not hunt him up," Anne expostulated. "He just came, the way Gay said."

"We didn't invent him, Grace," said Helen.

"You needn't have found him," Grace grumbled.

"Now that he is found," Mary remarked quietly, "what are we going to do about it?"

"Forget it. Forget it just as quick as we can."

Nobody spoke for a minute. Grace's words struck five people with the impact of a new idea. The sixth arose and extended a long brown hand.

"Shake, Gracie!" said Gay. "I'm with you there."

"You mean," Helen exclaimed, "that we're not to tell Judith that she has a fifth cousin?"

"Not a word."

"But—but why?"

"What good will he do her? Tell me that."

"He and his mother and his brothers will be 'folks,' Gay."

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"That's all they'll be. What can they do for her?"

"Not one single thing," cried Grace. "Why, Helen Thayer, they're worse than no relations at all."

"I thought he was quite nice," Helen faltered.

Grace swept on. "Here we've been and got Judith's hopes up. We've promised her a family that could do things for her, give her a home and good times, take her traveling maybe, and all that kind of thing, people that could make up to her for having lived in an orphan asylum most all her life. That's what we've promised. The people we've found are half-orphans themselves. They couldn't even give her a place to live in. It's a little more than they can do to find a place to live in themselves. Do you think it would be decent of us, Helen Thayer, to go to Judith French and say, 'We couldn't find you any rich relatives. Here are some poor ones. They aren't what we wanted, but they're yours.'"

"If they are hers ——" Anne began.

"That's so," Estelle exclaimed, drowning Anne's soft objection. "It would be sort of a mean trick to play on Judith, wouldn't it? That boy has his hands more than full now."

"It isn't as though he were a really truly relative," Sally agreed. "Fifth cousins don't count,

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whatever Gay says, especially if you don't know about 'em."

"And what Judith doesn't know about can't hurt her," Gay finished.

The others nodded solemnly.

"We probably won't ever find anybody else." Mary threw out the remark hesitatingly.

"Probably not," said Gay.

"Why not?" Sally questioned.

"Lightning never strikes twice in the same spot."

F. O. C. pondered.

"I'd rather not find Judith any relatives than find her this kind," Grace said positively.

"Then we'll have to give up having Judith for the Secret."

"It looks that way, Helen." Gay plaited her long fingers together absently. "We have certainly botched this job."

"Oh, dear!" said Helen.

Sally scowled ferociously. Estelle punched a pillow. The others sat disconsolate.

"I think," Anne's soft little voice broke the gloomy hush of the room, "I think that we ought just to tell Judith what we have found out."

"Why?" Five tongues threw the word at her.

"That boy is her cousin."

"Not so you'd notice it."

"Maybe not, Gay. But—— Oh, I don't want to

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have to tell her this. I wanted the great-uncle as much as you did. I wanted Judith to have somebody splendid like Aunt Alice. But ——”

Gay interrupted. “If Mrs. Royce hadn’t been perfectly great the way she was, would you have wanted to know about her, Anne?”

“Yes, I would.”

“I wouldn’t!” Grace cried. “If she’d been *my* aunt and turned out horrid, I’d rather never have heard of her.”

“The question is,” Mary decided, “how would Judith feel? Would she rather find out there wasn’t anybody exciting to expect or keep on expecting and never know the truth?”

“She would rather know,” Helen cried. “I’m sure she would.”

Nobody dissented from this opinion.

“Just the same, we’ve played Judith a mean trick,” said Grace.

“We couldn’t help it,” said Sally.

“That doesn’t make it any nicer.”

“Who’s to tell her?” asked Estelle.

The seven exchanged reluctant glances.

“We’ll all tell her,” Gay adjudged. “Tomorrow.”

It was a despondent group that led Judith aside after school.

“We’re awfully sorry,” said Sally.

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"We just hate to tell you, but Anne says we must," said Grace.

"Don't feel too bad," Estelle pleaded.

"Make up your mind to be disappointed and then perhaps it won't hurt so much," urged Spud.

"Cheer up, Judith, we've gone and done it." This from Gay.

"I'm the one mostly to blame. Please try to forgive me." Helen's expression was woefully unhappy.

Anne said nothing, but squeezed Judith's hand.

Judith's eyes traveled from face to face in growing alarm.

"There hain't nothing happened to Johnny!"

They hastened to reassure her.

"Your mother ain't sick, Helen!"

"No, no, mother is perfectly well. It's only ——" Helen faltered. "It's only —— Try not to mind too much, Judith."

"We won't ever do it again," Spud promised.

"I guess I can stand whatever it is, so long as Johnny and Helen's mother aren't in it. What's wrong?"

"Everything," said Estelle soberly. "We—— we ——"

"We wish we'd never said a word to get your hopes up." Sally took up Estelle's faltering speech.

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"In a word," said Gay, "your prospects are busted, Judith. Flat as the flattest tire your fifth cousin ever pumped air into."

"I don't catch on," said Judith.

"Gay means," Anne told her, "that we couldn't find you any rich uncle. So we have found you somebody else."

"That we wish we hadn't found," Grace amended.

After that they all talked at once.

"He's a cousin, awfully distant."

"So far away you needn't feel obliged to own him."

"His great-uncle had cousins—they were only third cousins—in Westport, Maine."

"His father's dead and his mother's an invalid and there are four boys smaller than he."

"He wishes one of 'em was a girl, so ——"

"Gordon does the cooking. He's in the ninth grade. He just loves to study, but he's got to stop when his year's out, because ——"

"Pat makes the beds. He's nine. His name isn't Patrick, it's Patnod. Did you ever hear such a name?"

"Nicholas is seven and Dick's two."

"Nick takes care of the baby and waits on his mother while the others are in school. She teaches him. And people send in things. That helps.

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But Jack—he's the chauffeur—wants to bring 'em down here to live where he can look out for them himself."

"He doesn't know how he's going to do it. Four boys and an invalid mother!"

"Jack's making good money, but you can see ——"

"Before their father died it wouldn't have been so bad, Judith. Helen thinks he must have had a good salary. If we had found 'em then ——"

"He died of pneumonia. It was awfully sudden."

"You won't need to see him, so it's really almost as though we hadn't found him."

"He works at Stevenson's garage if you ever do want a peek. Helen just called you a friend. It's all right, you see."

"But we're terribly sorry. We meant to find you somebody perfectly gorgeous!"

"Can you forgive us for getting your hopes up and—and everything?"

Judith's contagious grin irradiated her whole plain countenance.

"Say, you aren't trying to tell me that you've really found me some folks, are you?"

"We've found some, but you needn't have them. Fifth cousins don't count," they hastened to assure her.

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"You're the greatest girls I ever saw in my life," Judith declared with conviction. "You beat the Dutch. Think of it! You've found me some folks. Me! Five boys, too! And a baby! I ain't asleep, am I?"

"Why, Judith French," Estelle exclaimed, "I believe you like it!"

"Like it? *Like it?* Maybe I do—just a little bit. A mother and five boys and one of 'em a baby! And I never had a relation of my own, not to know it, so long as I lived. Yes, I guess you might say I like it."

"But they're poor!" cried Grace.

"So'm I."

"Not nicely poor—really dreadfully poor!"

Judith's smile seemed to tickle her ears, it was so wide and so glowing. "That's nothing new to me. Why, I like being poor!"

"Honestly?" Gay asked.

"I shall, if I have folks. The only trouble with being my kind of poor was I hadn't any folks."

"But Judith," Helen demurred, "Jack French has too many folks already for—for the money he earns. He didn't say so, but I see it now. He can't afford to have a cousin, even a fifth cousin."

"Maybe he can't afford not to," said Judith. "You let Helen tell it all over to me again, so I'll

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get it straight in my head. Then I'll go home and think about it while I'm minding Johnny and washing the dishes, and after I've slept on it I guess I'll know what to do. My, but I'd just like to hug you girls, every one of you!"

Helen threw her arms around Judith's neck. "Oh, Judith, it's perfectly dear of you to take it so beautifully!"

Judith laughed joyously. "How'd you expect me to take it? I always was pretty lucky, but I never expected to get any folks. My, don't everything just come my way!"

CHAPTER XI

FIFTH COUSINS

JACK FRENCH, bending over a refractory tire, glanced up as a step sounded on the garage floor. Jack was alone and the responsibility of the shop's business sat alertly on his broad shoulders.

A girl stood in the door, a homely freckle-faced girl with twinkling gray eyes and a snub nose. She smiled, and the freckles and the snub nose vanished as by magic. Jack had not been feeling particularly cheerful as he worked at his tire. His thoughts had kept him ill company.

"Your name's Jack French, I guess," said the girl.

He acknowledged the charge wonderingly.

"Busy, aren't you? Can you talk while you work?"

He stared.

"My name's French, too. Judith French. Helen Thayer says we're fifth cousins."

Slowly light dawned on the boy. "Does Miss Thayer play basket-ball?"

Judith nodded. "She's forward on the team you took up to Racefield the other day."

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"Oh, I see." A flush darkened his face. "Sent you to look me up, did she?"

"No, she didn't." The visitor sat down on the step of the disabled car. "Keep right on with your job. If you're going to let me interrupt your work I'll have to try another day."

He bent again to the tire.

"Did your great-uncle have folks in Westport, Maine, honest?"

"Cousins."

"Know their names?"

The boy frowned. "Father played with a fellow he called Rex."

"Rex?"

"Short for Raymond. Ray French he called him, too."

"Glory hallelujah!"

"I beg your pardon."

"Excuse my French." Judith clapped her hand to her mouth. "Say, I didn't mean that! I'm kind of flabbergasted. Never expected to hear anybody say his father played with my father. Would you mind doing something for me right now?"

"What?"

"Say it again."

Jack repeated.

"Thank you. That's mighty good of you. If you'd lived in an asylum all your life and never

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had any folks, and never heard of anybody who'd ever heard of the folks you once had, you'd feel like listening twice to a thing like that."

"Asylum?"

She nodded. "There isn't much about one of 'em I don't know. I've got asylums down fine."

"I don't understand."

The friendly face turned full on him. "Didn't Helen Thayer tell you I was a charity child?"

"She didn't tell me anything—much. I blabbed a good deal myself, I guess."

"Well, I was," Judith informed him. "Father and mother died and I was all they left behind them. No money. It don't seem to run in the French family to have too much money, now does it? Then last summer Johnny's mother said would I come and live with her and help take care of Johnny and go to school. And this winter those blessed girls took it into their heads to find some folks for me. There isn't much they can't do if they set out. They're great girls. How's your mother? I'm sorry she's sick. Mothers look pretty nice to me."

It was impossible to help answering this girl in the kindly spirit of her own speech. Her friendliness was contagious. Before he knew it, Jack French was telling Judith his worries, his problems, his discouragements. Much more he told

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Judith than he had told Helen, gruelling anxieties that he had concealed from the other girl.

"I'd like to keep them together," he finished. "Father wanted us to stick together. But how? My job's here. If mother were well —— But she isn't, and I can't earn enough to hire a woman to keep house. As it is, people run in and lend a hand up at Racefield and Pat and Don are handy fellows. If I had 'em here —— No, I couldn't manage it. Don will have to leave school right away as things are. I've been trying to think he needn't. I'll write him to-night. Don's good at machinery. He can get a job all right. Pat's not old enough to quit school, but father had a cousin who's willing to take him. Son of the Uncle Eben father lived with when he was a boy. He'll take Nick, too. Don and I can pay mother's board and the baby's. I can't figure out any other way to keep going."

"You ought to have had a sister."

He ran grimy fingers through his thick black hair till it stood up like a brush. "Don't I know it?"

The twinkling eyes traveled admiringly over the strong figure. The hands that coerced the refractory tire were long and supple. The face, dark and disheartened, was finely modeled.

"And I'd thought of waiting till to-morrow!"

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she said half to herself. "If it isn't just my luck to have come 'round to-day."

"What's that?"

"You said you couldn't figure out any way to keep going unless you send off two of the boys to live with their uncle."

"Well, I can't. What of it?"

"I know another way."

"You do!" He stared at her.

"I guess it would work, too."

"What?"

"We're cousins. Maybe no nearer than fifth, but we're cousins. If you and I were to take hold of this thing together ——"

"You!"

"I haven't any money," Judith said simply, "but I'm strong, and I know how to do things. They called me pretty capable at the asylum. I dosed the youngsters and helped with the cooking and took care of the sick ones —— Why, I could give Johnny's mother points on housekeeping that she's never dreamed of! I'll bet I could run a little house for you and your mother and the boys, and do it as cheap as you could get her and the baby boarded, and pay for your keep and Don's too, I'll bet I could!"

"What if you could?"

The light in Judith's eyes flickered lower, but

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she smiled bravely. "I don't suppose it looks to you the way it does to me. No, I don't suppose it does. You've always had folks. But I thought if you really wanted to keep 'em together—— It don't cost any more to keep house for seven than for six, and I don't eat very much. But I guess I'd be a stranger to you. Yes, that's it, I'd be a stranger."

"Do you mean," he broke in, "that you're proposing to come and keep house for us?"

"That's what I was doing." The voice was earnest. "Maybe it was cheeky, but I didn't mean it so. I got to thinking, what if I'd been that sister you didn't have. Wouldn't it have been great! I didn't see quite how it was going to look to you."

"It looks to me as though the fellow would have his nerve with him who'd take you up on it. See here, you—you didn't mean it, did you?"

"I didn't mean anything else."

"But you never saw me before in your life. You don't know us—the boys—mother—— Why, you might not like us!"

"You mean you might not like me, I guess." Judith essayed a laugh. "I hadn't thought of it that way. Maybe you wouldn't. I'd like you all right. Cousins! Cousins!" She tasted the word luxuriously.

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"You go to school, don't you?"

"I could do what I said I'd do, and manage my lessons. Mr. Hershey'd let me go in just to recite. That wouldn't bother me."

"Is there anything that would bother you?"

"Nothing I've thought of yet," she said honestly.

The two met each other's eyes squarely.

"Look here," said the boy suddenly, "you're all right. Understand? I'm a thousand times obliged to you. But I can't take you up on that proposition. Why, if I did I ought to be kicked around the block! What would you be getting out of it, I'd like to know?"

Judith glowed. "Folks."

He brushed aside the word. "A lot of hard work for people that you never heard of until this week, people that haven't the ghost of a claim on you. Fifth cousins! Maybe they're well enough to hail when the going's good. There's no call for 'em to get out and push when the car's stuck in the mud. You're a mighty generous girl, but you've got your own road to look out for, remember that."

A little sigh escaped Judith's lips. "Yes, you've always had folks," she said half to herself. "Me, generous! Anybody can see with half an eye that I'd do most anything to get some folks. I'd

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go down on my knees and scrub floors for a living till I was a hundred and one, just to have somebody belonging to me that I could take care of. But you don't want any more folks. I see that. Maybe I wouldn't if I was you. Can't imagine myself not wanting more, but maybe I wouldn't. I'd better go now, or you won't get that job done to-night."

Judith took two or three steps toward the door. Then she turned back. "I—I wasn't asking you to hire me, you know, like that woman you said you couldn't afford. You'd have to furnish my keep at first, but soon I'd have a way to earn a bit on the side. I could find something. It was a kind of a partnership I had in mind. You'd put in most of the capital and I'd do the investing and manage the business. I'd like it fine. I guess you would, too, if we were only first cousins instead of fifth."

"You're the queerest girl I ever saw."

Judith twinkled at him bravely. "Oh, there's nothing queer about me," she announced. "My bringing-up's been a little odd, maybe. Most folks are a good deal alike under the skin." She nodded and turned away.

He watched her go, irresolute. Then he took a step as though to follow, but pulling himself up short, turned back to his work. The room seemed

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curiously empty without those gray eyes. He felt strangely lonely without that friendly voice in his ears. If a fellow had a sister like that, he thought—— Well, there wouldn't be much he couldn't do. The cheerfulness of her! Why, it made you think things were going all right just to look at that grin of hers. Did that girl ever get down-hearted? He couldn't imagine it. Yet she hadn't gone away as happy as she came.

The young mechanic sprang to his feet and bolted through the garage door. At the corner of the street he overtook Judith.

"Look here, let me sleep on that proposition, will you?"

There was no misreading the brightness that flashed into her face. "That's it," she told him. "You think it over. Nobody wants to jump in the dark. I wouldn't, if I was you."

Then he said what he had not meant to say. "You might go up and talk with mother. Could you?"

"That's the way to do it. I'll manage some-way." Her face kindled. "My, but I'd like to see those boys and that baby! I won't go till you say, though."

Two days later a high-powered motor car came to a halt beside Judith and Johnny near their own door. The chauffeur sprang out.

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"Hello, Cousin Judith. Is that partnership still open?"

"Nobody's taken it up yet that I've heard of."

"You haven't changed your mind then?"

"Me? I don't change my mind much."

"I'll bet you don't. Go up and see mother and the kids as soon as you can. Find out what you're getting into. I've talked with her. If you and she say all right, we'll call it a go."

"Honest?"

"I mean it."

Judith beamed on him. "That's all right then. My, but I'm glad! You tell me how to find the house, and I'll take the train the first afternoon Johnny's mother lets me off. I'll tell her to-night to be looking out for somebody in my place. Got a house in mind yet?"

"Nothing I can afford."

"There's a little one on Oak Street," Judith told him. "It's a story and a half cottage. The family moved out yesterday. I met 'em when I went over to Helen's. Nobody is coming in right now, so far as they know. I asked 'em. It's not much to look at, and it's pretty old, so the rent ought not to be high. From the look outside I calculate there'd be room enough. Here's the agent's address. I wrote it right down when the woman told me."



“YOU’RE ALL RIGHT”

FIFTH COUSINS

"My eye! You're a hustler."

"When you see a thing you want, it pays to step lively."

He held out his hand. "Put it there, cousin. You're all right, sure enough. But I won't pay any money down till you've seen mother."

"Ain't there a thing they call getting a refusal? You might do that."

His dark eyes scrutinized her keenly. "It wasn't a joke, then."

"What wasn't a joke?"

"That Oak Street house?"

"Well, I guess not! Haven't I been on the lookout for a house ever since those girls told me about you? Houses that will do for us are mighty scarce."

"Don't I know it? But you may back out after you've seen the kids. Mother says you don't know what you're getting into."

"That's so," Judith told him. "I don't. I ain't never had the chance to find out how it feels to be in a family. Did you hear me say 'us' a minute ago? You don't catch me backing down on a chance to say us. No, siree! When I want to quit I'll let you know, and till then don't you go to letting slip any chances to put a roof over our heads. There, I said it again. Ginger! it tastes better 'n I thought it would, and goodness knows I thought it would be like heaven."

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"I'll run through Oak Street on my way to the garage."

"That's the way to talk. You'll be all right when once you get rid of that notion I don't mean what I say, Cousin Jack."

"Cousin Judith."

"Don't it sound good! Well, Johnny wants to be going."

He jumped into the car, waved her a good-bye, and shot down the street. His heart felt lighter than it had done for weeks. He whistled about his work at the garage. The morose look faded out of his face. Of course, they might all come a cropper together, but somehow he didn't think they would. That girl didn't look like the sort to come croppers. If she stuck to her decision after seeing his mother, and now his lips puckered over the *if*, he and she would have a talk some night. They must get down to business, figure out what they had to do and what there was to do it with. It was going to feel good to talk straight out to somebody! He had never cared to bother his mother. He had made light of difficulties to her. He wouldn't have to make light of anything to this girl. But already he sensed the fact that seen through her merry gray eyes difficulties would wear a brighter face. Hope nodded to him and his head lifted. All he had asked was a chance to

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keep the family together. He would work like a dog for that. He would grudge to that none of his old dreams of college and a profession. Cousin Judith. It sounded good, as good as the sight of the girl herself made a fellow feel. Queer, how she made you feel. Seemed to think you were doing her a favor to let her help you take care of your mother and the kids. Well, she shouldn't ever regret her action, not if Jack French could help it.

Judith, meanwhile, was encountering opposition to her plan in other quarters.

"Judith French!" gasped Johnny's mother. "Whatever shall I do without you? Really I must say these cousins of yours are extremely inconsiderate, asking you to leave me now when Johnny is teething and I don't know which way to turn. Inconsiderate! They are positively brutal."

"Oh, I won't be leaving you without anybody," Judith hastened to assure her cheerfully. "There was a girl at the asylum I know would just suit Johnny. She and I write to each other. I've told her all about him. She's pining to get away, too, the same as I was. It would be fine if you could get her to come. She talks nicer than I do. Pretty girl, too. Soft hair, just like silk. Yes, you'd like her. I'll write her and you might go

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up to see her next week. You wouldn't want to ask her to come without seeing her."

But the dismay of Johnny's mother was less stupefying than that of F. O. C. Judith stopped at Anne Alden's on her way home from the station after her trip to Racefield. The girls were making fudge in Anne's sitting-room. The fudge was half eaten, and the girls were putting on their hats to come away when Judith exploded her bomb shell.

"Now ain't this luck," she beamed, standing in the door, "my finding you all together! I had to tell somebody, and I'd picked out Anne because she's had one foot in the same boat with me. She wasn't rightly sure in her own mind for a while about her folks. I've been to see mine."

"Your fifth cousins?" They were crowding around her now. "Tell us quick. Are they nice? Who'd you see?"

"I saw mother." Judith's voice thrilled on the word. "She thought I might call her that even if I do call the boys cousins. Wouldn't any other word fit. She's *it* all over. That's what she is. My, I feel as though I'd been to church and heard a choir of angels singing when she speaks to me! Little, you know. Parts her hair in the middle and brushes it sort of ripply down close to her ears. Sits in a chair all the time, and sews. Oh, maybe she stops once in a dog's age. She stopped

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while I was there. She held my hand." Judith lifted the hand and dashed away a tear. Another took its place. Anne put her arms around the girl.

"Why, Judith! Judith, don't!"

The tears came faster. Judith put her head down on Anne's shoulder and cried openly. Helen possessed herself of one hand and smoothed it, murmuring cajoling words. Gay patted Judith's back, exhorting her at intervals to "buck up," not to "feel too bad," they'd all "stand by and try to make up somehow."

In a minute or two Judith's head lifted. She was smiling through her tears.

"Now wasn't that silly! I just couldn't seem to help it. Guess I don't know how to stand having folks. But you bet I'm not going to bawl all the time, if I am happy."

"Happy!" ejaculated the girls. "Were you crying because you were happy?"

Judith grinned. "Nothing else for me to cry about. It's all settled. Says she always wanted a daughter, and now God had sent one to her. I didn't cry about it till I got down here. Just as soon as Jack and I get the house in shape the furniture will be packed up and sent down and then —— Well, pretty soon after that we'll move in."

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"Move in!" Grace cried. "Judith French, what are you talking about?"

Judith looked from face to face. "Why, didn't I tell you? I guess I'm too excited to talk straight to-day. I went up there to Racefield to see Jack's mother and get it all settled, and 'tis settled. We're going to get together, the seven of us. Going to hire a house here in Saybrook, and I'm going to run it." Judith slapped her chest energetically and, picking up Anne, took a couple of whirling turns about the room. "Housekeeper—J. French. That's me—Judith. Head of the house, J. French. That's Cousin Jack. House-mother, the one who makes the wheels go round—that's Jack's mother and—and mine. And oh, but Dicky's a darling! I guess maybe he'll beat Johnny when I get used to the little tyke. He's my very own fifth cousin, anyway, which Johnny ain't, bless him!"

Gay caught Judith by the shoulders. "Are you telling us, J. French, that you are proposing to live with those people and keep house for them?"

Judith nodded gayly. "Don shan't stop school, not if I know myself. There'll be ways he can earn money outside school time. Pat's going to sell papers. Got it all planned, he had. He and Don walked down to the station with me. Nick wanted to come too. My, but I certainly do like boys!"

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"But, Judith!" gasped Grace. "They're only fifth cousins. They haven't a bit of a claim on you."

Judith's twinkle sparkled over the group. "Claim! Well, I guess not! I had a hard enough time staking out a claim on them. Thought once I'd met my finish in that Jack. But he gave in, when he saw how bad I wanted it. Now he's glad. Told me so to-night. When I got off the train, there he was to meet me. Maybe I didn't feel like the president of the United States and a brass band thrown in, only forty times bigger. Never expected to be met at a train by a real live relation. He had to hike back on the run to the garage. I didn't mind. I wanted to see you."

"Judith," Estelle questioned softly, "will you please tell us why you are doing what you're going to do?"

"Why," said Judith simply, "they're my relations, ain't they? I reckon it's up to me to take care of my own relations when they get in a hole. Besides, I like it." She drew a long breath and stretched out her arms to the girls. It was as though she gathered them all into a close embrace. "I'm so happy," she cried, "so happy! And it's all your doing. Every bit of it. If you hadn't made me the Secret—— Oh, how shall I ever thank you for finding my folks for me?"

CHAPTER XII

CONSPIRATORS

Two girls walked around a group of small boys playing marbles on the sidewalk and, mounting the steps, rang the bell of the house where Judith lived. It was vacation, and the girls felt like colts given pasture run after winter's housing. They wanted to race and shout. But they did neither. They merely walked skipingly, with many flourishes, totally unnecessary so far as locomotion was concerned, but absolutely essential to their peace of mind. It was April, and the sun caressed their cheeks one minute and pelted them with playful raindrops the next. Therefore they carried umbrellas which they despised.

"Are you sure the bell rang?" Helen asked Anne.

Anne pushed the button vigorously. "That makes twice I've heard it."

"Maybe nobody's at home."

Anne rang the third time. They held their breath and listened.

"Oh, dear!" said Helen. "Where can Judith have gone?"

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Anne teetered up and down on the door mat while she considered the question.

"Where did she say that house was Jack French was going to look at?"

"Oak Street," said Helen. "You don't think ——"

"I think she's there." Anne started to raise her umbrella.

Helen frisked down the steps. "Pouf! You don't need it. Only a drop."

"If we had looked there first," Anne remarked, "we might have saved time."

"Who wants to save time? It's vacation. We have all the time there is." Helen twirled her umbrella as she had seen a drum major whirl his baton.

"If Judith comes to live in that Oak Street house," Anne meditated, "she will be near us."

"We could almost cut across lots from our house," Helen acknowledged. "We can't quite, because of the fences, high board ones."

"If we were cats, we could," said Anne.

Helen jumped a puddle hilariously. "Wouldn't it feel funny to be cats and walk the fence tops! I'd be a yellow one and miaow like fury."

But Anne's flights of fancy were short.

"How shall we know which house it is?"

"By the looks. Judith called it a little house.

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We'll walk along until we see one that fits and then try it."

This program added spice to the search. They turned adventurously into Oak Street.

"You take that side to watch," Helen commanded. "I'll look on this side."

Their gaze jumped ahead, eagerly searching the street. House after house, comfortable two-storied structures; brown, gray, white, green now and then for variety; foursquare, octagon; plain, fanciful; compact, rambling. You had your choice of almost any kind of house on Oak Street, except apparently story and a half cottages.

"Do you see anything that looks like it, Helen?"

"No, but she said Oak Street. I heard her last Friday morning."

They walked swiftly, anxiety quickening their steps. On either hand little squares of greening grass separated the houses from the sidewalks. Branches, still bare, but faintly knobby with leaf buds stretched above their heads. Children played and shouted in the sunshine. The girls turned aside to avoid interrupting an energetic rope jumper. They traversed two games of tag. Still no sign of Judith's little house. "It's a long street," Anne observed.

"I almost never go through it," said Helen.

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They pressed on fearfully.

"I see the end of it," said Anne.

"And I don't see ——"

"Oh!" Both girls jumped with the surprise of it.

Between two of the corpulent solid-looking houses slunk a third. No other word describes the furtive air of its retreat. It seemed to have backed away from the street as though to hide behind its more prosperous neighbors. This was not difficult, because of its size. The house was very small; you failed to see it until you were fairly abreast of it. Its long roof, broken by a single dormer eye, sloped surprisingly near the ground. On either side of its low doorway were two small-paned windows. Old lilac bushes, last year's dry seed pods thick upon them, hugged its sides. Equally old syringa bushes marched stockily toward the sidewalk. The shingles of the roof were moss-grown and the paint had long ago scaled from the walls. The branches of a huge sycamore tree sprawled protectingly above the weather-worn little house, shaking out thousands of yellow catkins against the soft blue sky. Perhaps the sycamore managed to reassure the shrinking place. Helen thought so. As she gazed, her first impression changed gradually. The little house, dingy and old and uncared for as it was,

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now looked comfortably at home, like a cat basking on a kindly hearth, more comfortably at home than the bigger houses which surrounded it.

"This must be it," said Anne.

There was no gate, and the girls turned into the gravel path, walking uncertainly.

"She may not be here," Helen said.

Anne found a bell and pulled. Its jangle made them both jump. How stupid to have thought Judith was here! And how dreadful to have rung the bell of an empty house! It made you feel like a trespasser, and worse than a trespasser, as though you were hammering on a mystery, Helen thought. Of course there wasn't any mystery, but —— She pulled Anne's sleeve. "Don't do it again."

"Why not?" Anne asked.

Then Judith opened the door.

"Now isn't this great!" Her face beamed on them like a freckled sun. "You knew right where to find me, didn't you? Come in! Come in! I've got a fire in the kitchen. Johnny's there. It's our house now. Jack's taken it. The rent's paid up for a month, too. Our house. Hurrah!"

"That is splendid," said Anne. Her face reflected Judith's happiness. "When are you going to move in?"

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"Just as soon as we can. The quicker, the better. We've got to. My, I'm glad this week's vacation! Just my luck. Don't you want to go over the house?"

If they had not wanted to go over the house, they could hardly have failed to catch Judith's enthusiasm. From room to room the three pressed, while Judith's tongue tripped through a maze of explanations. She told them where everybody was to sleep and who was to bunk with whom. She patched tattered wall paper with the glamor of her own high humor and whitened dingy paint with the shining of her happy eyes.

"Of course we're sorry the man don't feel he can do anything to fix it up a little before we go in. But there, I guess we'll be too happy to notice whether any paper's on the walls or not, and he's giving it to us dirt cheap. Jack says he can't charge any more without putting good money into it. Jack's going to do over his mother's room himself, paint it, too. We agreed that room must be pretty, whatever the rest is. This is hers, the front corner down-stairs. I'm to have this little room just behind it. Across the entry is the parlor, dining-room, everything in one. That's where we'll live. And back of that's the kitchen. The boys sleep up-stairs. It won't be any trouble to keep this house clean. I tell Jack I could do it

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easy, with one hand tied behind me. Doll's play, that's what it's going to be. Never had much chance at dolls when I was the right age. I'll make up for it now."

Helen stood gazing around her in the parlor-dining-living-room. The dinginess of everything oppressed her more than it seemed to oppress Anne.

"I wish you could paint and paper this, Judith," she said.

"It would be nice," Judith acknowledged. "Some day we will when we get fairly going. I'll bet I could paint this myself. If Jack can spare the money, I'm going to ask him to bring up a couple of cans of white paint. If he can't—when the place is cleaned up and the furniture's in, it won't look bad. Those folks that went out didn't know what clean meant, I guess." Judith chuckled. "This morning I've been burning up the papers they left behind 'em. And boxes. And bottles. And cans. Can't burn them, of course. You wait till I get through with this place."

"I wish we could help," said Anne.

"Bless you!" cried Judith. "Haven't you done it all so far? To-night if Johnny's mother is tired enough to stay home when she gets back from the city, Jack and I are coming up here to work. Soap and water after a good broom, that's

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what this place needs. He's a great boy, Cousin Jack. He's a worker. You won't know this house to-morrow."

"Why did Johnny's mother go to the city?" Helen asked. She did not mean to be inquisitive. The inside of the little house had made her feel tired and blue, and she spoke without thinking.

"To get me a successor," said Judith. "Hope she likes her. Sade Brigham's a nice girl. She ought to like her. No, Johnny, I wouldn't try to get out if I was you. I'd stay in my carriage. It's healthier up there."

"I'll look after him, Judith," said Helen. She and the chubby baby picked up their friendship where they had last left it. To keep Johnny's favor you had to put your mind on the business. This circumstance worked to Helen's advantage. Her spirits began to climb up again out of their April dumps to April cheer.

Three tolerably happy girls—Judith was blissful, and that helped raise the average—and a contented baby left the little house, Judith locking the door behind her.

"I'll just leave the key at the next house," she explained. "A real pleasant woman lives there. We saw her the day Jack and I went over the house after taking it and she said we might leave the key with her whenever we liked. It saves a

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good bit of shoe leather, since Jack and I can't always get off at the same time."

Helen and Anne heard her heedlessly. The words did not seem to concern them. Johnny appeared at the moment to be much more their affair.

At the corner Judith and Johnny went one way; Helen and Anne another. Helen's spirits were falling again. They were like the weather, seesawing from fleckless blue to gloom.

"I think that house was awful!" she broke forth.

"Was it?" Anne looked startled. "I didn't notice."

Helen turned on her. "Where were your eyes, Anne Alden?"

"Judith looked so happy I felt happy too."

"Forget Judith for a minute and think," Helen commanded. "Just think."

Anne thought. "Judith said it would look better when the furniture is in."

"Do you remember in the living-room on the wall that has just one window that big space where the paper is torn off?"

Anne acknowledged that she did.

"No furniture will cover that. Did you notice the brown spot on the wall next the kitchen, most a yard square it was?"

Anne confessed to the spot also.

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"And the paint ——"

"Jack and Judith are going to do over the paint," Anne insisted. "Anyway, it doesn't look as bad as the hermit's house."

"It looks sort of cute before you go into it," Helen agreed. "For all it's so dingy outside, I'd have liked it if I hadn't gone in."

The two girls walked home soberly. Anne was trying to think the little house through, subtracting the glamor of Judith's presence; Judith was always for Anne a completely absorbing spectacle. Helen was trying to see the rooms that had quenched her interest as Judith saw them. Certainly furniture would make a difference, but ——

"Anyway," Anne announced hopefully, "Judith will be in them."

She took the problem to her grandfather at luncheon. Anne and her grandfather had a great deal to say to each other nowadays at meals. The silent hours they used to pass in each other's company amazed Anne whenever she thought of them. She was too happy to think of them often.

Anne frowned a little in her endeavor to arrive at a just statement of the case. "Helen saw the spots and I saw Judith," she finished. "Of course she saw Judith and I saw the spots, too, but we mostly saw the way I said first. How do you think it will look to other people, grandfather?"

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"Are the spots very prominent, Anne?"

"Yes. But then, so is Judith."

"I agree with you, granddaughter. I think I should fail to see a spot if Miss French was in the room with it."

Anne dimpled. "You said that beautifully, grandfather. I wish I could say things the way you say them. You don't suppose, do you," it was evident the coming question lay heavy on Anne's mind, "you don't suppose Judith saw the spots the way Helen did and was just making the best of them? She can't see herself, you know. There'd be nothing but spots for her to see."

Mr. Lathrop regarded Anne gravely. "So the spots made Miss Thayer feel bad."

Anne nodded.

"In that case, I am inclined to think them reprehensible, extremely reprehensible. Anne, should you like to join a conspiracy?"

"Catiline was in a conspiracy, wasn't he?"

"I referred to a different stripe of conspirator. You and I and possibly Miss Thayer."

Anne's eyes sparkled. "I'd love to be in a conspiracy with you, grandfather. So would Helen."

He beckoned and she slipped around the table to his chair. The white mustache tickled her ear for two minutes.

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Anne gave a little jump of delighted comprehension. "Oh, grandfather!"

Soon she returned to her seat and conversation progressed in mysterious dislocated sentences.

"Helen and I could do that. We'd manage someway."

"If she caught you ——"

"She wouldn't. We wouldn't let her catch us."

"The conscript fathers caught Catiline."

"We'd be more careful than Catiline,—lots more careful. But Jack ——"

"I'll settle Jack. I may have to go to Boston some day this week. I had thought of taking you."

"I couldn't leave here that day. Something might happen."

He assented gravely.

"If you went another day ——" she suggested.

"I should hire a machine at Stevenson's garage."

"Oh! Oh! I was stupid. No, I couldn't go, grandfather."

"My business is somewhat musty. It would not interest you particularly, and I do not see how I could feel quite secure unless I left a faithful lieutenant in charge here."

"You can trust me, grandfather."

"We will trust each other, granddaughter." He

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bowed his courtly head. "Would Miss Thayer care to accompany us on a little trip down-town this afternoon?"

"She would love it."

"My dear," said Mr. Lathrop, "I fear we should have made our conspiracy a purely postprandial exercise. You are not eating."

"I can't," Anne told him, "not now. I ate enough before this course anyway. When can we start?"

The blue-gray eyes hid a twinkle. "Conspirators require patience, my dear Anne. It is the chief stock in trade of the successful members of the craft. Could Miss Thayer be ready to accompany us about three?"

"I'll see," Anne said. "I'll tell her just the way you told me."

"Do so," he counseled gravely. "There is a great deal in approach. The method of approach often spells success or failure. However I do not think you will find Miss Thayer difficult to persuade."

At three o'clock, to be precise, at a half a minute before three, Helen, watching from a front window of the house under the elms, saw the door across the street open and Mr. Lathrop and Anne emerge. Immediately Helen issued from her own door and picked her way delicately through the mud-pud-

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dles. The sky shone blue overhead and the sky of her heart smiled too, quite as though neither had previously known showers. The three conspirators met on the sidewalk.

"The essence of successful conspiracy," remarked Mr. Lathrop, "is to act as though one were doing nothing unusual."

"That will be hard." Helen looked anxious. "I don't feel a bit usual. Do you, Anne?"

"No," said Anne. "I feel awfully unusual."

"Jumpy inside," explained Helen. She gave a little skip to illustrate the jumpiness. "Would we better try to act usual?"

"I would seriously advise it, so far as you can."

"That will be fun, too," Helen decided. "If we meet any of the girls, Anne, and they ask us what we are doing, we'll say—we'll say ——"

"That we are down-town with grandfather," suggested the literal Anne.

"That won't be very exciting."

"If we are being usual, we can't be exciting."

"No, I suppose not. You're right, Anne. But we can think, Oh, if you only knew what we really are doing, just wouldn't you jump around! We can think that. Now I'm going to be usual."

Helen gave another little skip to illustrate how very ordinary was the expedition, and settled to a sedate walk. But her eyes danced, her cheeks

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were flushed, and her lips curved every few minutes in a way that confessed only too frankly her thoughts were not of the soberest. Anne's face shone like a rosy star and the arm linked in Helen's pressed her chum's ecstatically.

"There's Gay!" whispered Anne.

"Be ordinary!" Helen warned.

"I'd like to look in this window a minute, grandfather," said Anne.

The three halted, while two of them gazed with blind eyes at an array of hardware.

"Wanting to buy a coal-hod, Anne?" queried Gay's mischievous voice.

"Why—why, no!" Anne's awakened attention groped frantically for a plausible explanation of her stare. The window held nothing but coal-hods; black coal-hods, white coal-hods, galvanized iron coal-hods; coal-hods of every size and form.

"It's—it's those little ones," Anne said hastily. "Don't you think they'd be cute for—for fudge, Gay?"

"Are you feeling well, Anne?"

"Not to cool it in," Helen rallied to the aid of her fellow-conspirator. "To serve from, cut up in chunks, you know. You could pour them out, just the way you do coal. Oh, I'll tell you what would be cute!" Helen's imagination was work-

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ing bravely now. "If we could get some really tiny ones, dolls' size—these must be for children—and use them for individual fudge dishes, and fill them up from the bigger one."

Gay inspected the two carefully. Then she turned to Mr. Lathrop. "Have they been like this long?"

"Inspiration seldom continues at a gallop for many miles, Miss Flint."

"I thought not."

"We had been looking," Helen explained, wishing Gay's brown eyes would take their mischievous probe to less sensitive quarters. "We only just now began to talk."

"As I came up."

"We had been looking," Helen parroted.

"Yes, we were looking," Anne said. "That's how we happened to see—the little ones."

"Honestly?" Gay questioned. "I must remember that. Look and you'll see—what you'll see. Want me to help you buy them?"

Anne jumped. "How did ——"

Helen pinched her. "Buy what?"

"Coal-hods."

"Oh!" said Anne.

"We're not buying to-day," Helen answered.

"We're just looking."

"To be sure. You told me that before, didn't

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you? Stupid of me to forget. But I wouldn't have 'em too often, if I were you."

Helen was bewildered now. "Have what?"

"Ideas like that coal-scuttle-fudge combination. They might overheat your heads. Maybe you'll be all right if I run along. You said I set you off, didn't you?"

"I don't remember saying anything of the kind," said Helen.

"Oh, no. I remember now. You said you only began to talk as I came up. Rather funny, that. I must be careful how I come up, if it's going to have this effect on you. Put me down for the party, Anne."

"The—the party?"

"The coal-hod fudge-party. Thanks tremendously for the invitation."

The conspirators emerged from the encounter, wiser and more alert.

"Gay almost found us out," whispered Anne.

"She knows we're not going to buy coal-hods." Helen had no illusions on that point. "She doesn't know what we are to buy, but—— It is hard to act ordinary when you are feeling different."

"It is, indeed," said Mr. Lathrop.

He held open a door and they entered, excitement mounting in their veins. It is to be feared that they abandoned all attempts to be ordinary.

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The half hour that ensued mingled pleasure with responsibility. The responsibility was gratifying, but it belonged entirely to Anne and Helen. Mr. Lathrop refused to have any part in it. The three sat on chairs while a clerk hovered in front of them, his hands busy. The girls' eyes lifted fearfully whenever the door opened and returned in relief to their quest as often as incoming customers were revealed as strangers. The next time might prove them less lucky. Insecurity added a fillip to the already piquant dish of adventure at their lips.

At last they were through ; the final order given, a name and address tendered, one neither girl had heard before.

"I did a little telephoning," Mr. Lathrop explained, "before leaving home. Our purchases will not be unexpected. May I ask you young ladies to accompany me further?"

Their mystification cleared as he paused before a candy store. Established at one of the shining round tables, mounds of frozen lusciousness before them, Mr. Lathrop glanced about him. There was no furtiveness in his air, but both girls thrilled to his next words.

"Is it safe to speak? We shall not be overheard by any who might hold the key to our conversation?"

"No," breathed Helen and Anne together.

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"I don't know any of the people at the next tables." Helen's manner imitated Mr. Lathrop's exactly. Her voice was low, but not too low; her air was negligent. But her eyes gleamed. To sit at a round table in company with Anne's grandfather in the midst of strange people and talk secrets—conspiracy could do no better. Almost she forgot her favorite ice-cream. It was a pity, for the ice-cream was good.

"The question is," Mr. Lathrop remarked, precisely as though he were saying, "How delicious this cream is!" "The question is, how shall we allow this thing to end? In other words do my fellow-plotters favor incorporating a dénouement in our conspiracy?"

"I'm not quite sure what a dénouement is," Helen confessed. "Is it the place in the book where everything is told right out, near the end, everything you haven't known before, and it surprises you?"

"Where the plot explodes, so to speak," he suggested. "Shall we explode our plot at the proper time or—er—keep it dark forever?"

"You mean," said Anne, "shall we tell Judith, when we have surprised her, that we did it, or shall we let her think something else?"

"You have stated my meaning, granddaughter!"

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Both girls looked very sober.

"If we did not tell her," Helen asked at last, "what would Judith think? She is very quick, you know, and bright."

"I am well aware of Miss French's mental powers. But our conspiracy, I am convinced, is well hidden. It is my candid opinion that unless informed to the contrary, Miss Judith French will be likely to ascribe the results of our afternoon's work to a change of mind on the part of her landlord. In fact, should you decide in favor of this issue, I believe I can ensure its becoming a certainty."

"What do you think, grandfather?"

"I prefer, my dear Anne, to leave the decision entirely to you and Miss Helen Thayer. In this matter I act under your orders."

Helen and Anne exchanged glances.

"We couldn't be there at the house," Helen said, "when Judith discovered it, if she wasn't to find out we had known about it."

"If she knew we knew, she'd guess we had had something to do with it," Anne acknowledged.

"But I did want to see her face when she saw it first."

"So did I. Judith wouldn't mind knowing it wasn't the landlord."

"Jack French would."

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"Would he? Why should he, if Judith didn't?"

"He's awfully proud," Helen said, "and independent. And we're Judith's friends, not his. Somehow I think he'd rather have it the landlord."

"I don't care if he would," said Anne.

Helen brightened. "Don't you? Then let's let Judith guess, if she can."

But Anne was thinking, "Will Judith feel bad if Jack French doesn't like grandfather's having done it?"

"My name will not appear, Anne," Mr. Lathrop interposed. "I am the silent partner of this conspiracy, remember."

"It is nearly all you," said clear-headed little Anne. "We couldn't have done anything by ourselves. Everybody will know that. Judith and that Jack will know you really did it. Will she be sorry if he feels bad, Helen? He is her 'folks.'"

"I wish you hadn't thought of that, Anne."

"You think she will be sorry?"

Helen wriggled. "I'm afraid so."

"Then," said Anne, "we must never tell her or let her find out that it wasn't the landlord."

"No," sighed Helen. "And we can't watch her face when she discovers it, either."

"She will come and tell us just as quick as she

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can. We have decided, grandfather, we won't have any dénouement."

The three consumed their cream quietly.

"It is going to be awfully hard to look right," said Helen.

"We *must* look right," said Anne.

A good many things were hard. To know a big beautiful secret, and to act as though you didn't know it, is extremely difficult. Helen and Anne caught themselves on the point of tripping a dozen times a day. More than once they saved themselves only by a quick turn of speech. It was hard to find a chance to have a word with Johnny's mother when Judith was certain not to come unexpectedly on the scene, but Helen and Anne managed it. Wasn't that their very own private part of the conspiracy, planned and arranged by a committee of the whole plot? It was harder to keep quiet before F. O. C.; never to murmur, "I know something nice that's going to happen pretty soon;" never to whisper together suggestively; never to acknowledge by sign or word a mutual understanding unshared by the others. It was hardest of all to live through that day when a motor car shot away from the brick house on Beech Street bearing Mr. Lathrop and a dark young chauffeur.

So much was happening. How could they keep

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their minds from the glorious secret? How could they hold their attention to common things? Soon after midday in desperation the two girls decided to risk a call on Judith. They went through Oak Street and they stopped once on the way, at a house where no one was at home except workmen. Of course, it was risky; that, as Helen pointed out, constituted the peculiar spice of stopping. They took precautions, however. They were very careful to inquire, "Is Miss French here?" of the workman nearest the door. And when on the sidewalk they encountered a lady whom they both adjudged to belong to the next house, Helen remarked apologetically, "There seems to be no one at home. You couldn't tell us, could you——" The lady did not wait to hear what she could or could not tell. "They haven't been near the place to-day, neither the girl nor the boy," she told Helen and Anne. "The workmen came this morning at eight. That job's going to be put through quick, I guess." Helen and Anne thanked her and hurried off, squeezing each other's hands and trying to keep the jubilation out of their bearing.

They found Judith as nearly out of patience as that cheerful young person had ever shown herself.

"We meant to strike for half a day off and go

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up to the house and work to-day," she told them. "But didn't Jack stop for a jiffy at ten minutes of eight this morning to say he'd got to take a party in to Boston, leaving at eight o'clock! And hasn't Johnny's mother kept me on the jump all day! Thought she'd begin to clean house up-stairs, she did. It's fun to clean house, but I had been planning to do it for my own house. Little jolt for Judith. Never mind, there's more days coming. Jack finished his mother's room last night. It's painted and papered and fresh as a pin now, hooray!"

"Hooray it is," said Anne.

The two girls left Judith to her cleaning and returned to Beech Street to wander through their respective gardens, watch the clock, and keep an ear open for the honk-honk of motor cars. They did not dare to pay another visit to Oak Street.

At five minutes past five the third conspirator stepped from his hired motor car at his own door. Some half hour later events developed.

They began with an apparition of Judith, cheeks brilliant, eyes blazing, hat awry.

"Come! Come quick!" Judith cried. "Come over and see what's happened!"

"What—what has happened?" Helen managed to ask.

She received no answer. The three girls hurried

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through the streets. Judith threw open the door of the little house on Oak Street and ushered them into the living-room. She whirled them from living-room to kitchen, through her own prospective bedroom, and on into "Mother" French's.

"Look!" she commanded joyously. "Just look! Oh, glory!"

Helen jumped up and down as delightedly as though she had not known what to look for. "Oh!" she cried ecstatically, "oh! I'm so happy."

"I knew you two'd be glad," said Judith rapturously. "That's why I ran all the way to get you."

"Who—who did it?" asked Anne.

"The landlord," said Judith. "Jack took the car the minute he saw this and hunted him up. Said he guessed it did look too bad to live with, after all. But fresh paint and paper both—it's too good to be true. And I'd been thinking sort of mean thoughts of that man."

"The paper is rather pretty," said Helen. "Don't you think so?"

"It's beautiful. I couldn't have done half so well, if I'd picked it out myself. Look out for that paint! It's fresh, Helen. They don't generally do a job this way. Put on an extra force and did it up quick, the man told Jack. Couldn't get

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them any other day. Yes, that paper's pretty enough to eat."

Helen and Anne did not even look at each other.

CHAPTER XIII

MOVING IN

"SAY that again," said Judith.

She was on her knees in "mother's" room, a wet cloth in her hand, a pail of soapy water beside her.

The boy in the doorway repeated his words, with additions.

"The Browns will take the house in Racefield if they can move in Monday. They've got to get out of the rooms they're in now. Another bunch is moving in there. For them to move in Monday mother says we must be out on Saturday. If they go in, there'll be no rent to pay at Racefield after this week. If they don't, it will mean double rent for a bit—there and here. Our contract called for a month's notice. Besides, we'd like to oblige Mr. Curley. He's been a first-rate landlord. What do you say?"

"To-day is Thursday," said Judith.

"I know it's short notice."

"How much is to be done up there?"

"Mother and the boys have things pretty well

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looked over. I could pack 'em up in a couple of days, Don and Pat helping. That means the first load would start down here Saturday morning early. Stevenson will let me off work for the rest of this week. I'll get back Saturday morning and help here."

Judith shook her head. "No, you won't. I'll manage this end. You stay up there and bring down your mother Saturday night. I guess you won't find much time to sit around and twiddle your thumbs."

"You can't," he told her bluntly. "You can't manage this end all by yourself."

Judith thought a moment. "I'll tell you what. Send Don down Saturday morning. Don and I can do it. If you need Don, send Pat."

His jaw set. "I'll do nothing of the sort. Do you think I'm going to let you work yourself to a rag? Besides, you couldn't do it even with Don to help. How much time can you spend over here the rest of this week?"

"Sade Brigham came last night. That's why I'm here now. Johnny's mother likes her real well."

"It's too much for one girl to handle," he repeated doggedly. "Better pay double rent for a while than wear you out."

Judith shook her head. "Don't talk about

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throwing away good money, Jack French. I won't be worn out. Now you go right up and tell that man Curley your mother will be out of the Racefield house Saturday."

He hesitated. "I don't just like it."

"Well, I do. I'm tickled pink to think of it. If I wasn't mopping this floor, I'd jump up and down all over the place. Saturday! It's most too good to be true."

"Look here! You're a good sport, Cousin Judith. Would you tell me if you couldn't see your way through, honor bright?"

She nodded. "If I get stuck I'll send for you. That's a bargain."

"Then I'm off. Good luck!"

"Good luck, Jack."

The door shut behind the boy and hasty footsteps dashed down the path. Judith went on with her mopping.

"I'm blessed if I see how this thing's going to work out. He's got his hands full. Mine——" She surveyed them a minute. Then, as though to make up for the lost seconds, redoubled her strokes. "I guess I can do what I've got to, even if I don't see how."

The floor was finished and Judith had begun on her own room when the bell jangled. Immediately the house was full of voices. As a matter of fact,

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there were only two, but they reverberated blithely through the empty rooms.

"Judith! Where are you, Judith?"

"We thought we'd save you from coming to the door, so we walked right in."

Helen and Anne halted in the doorway.

"Oh, you're slopping water around," Helen cried. "What fun!"

Anne watched Judith with interest. "I wish I could do that."

Judith laughed up at them gayly. "You won't mind if I don't stop. I'm in a drive this morning."

"Oh, don't stop!" Anne urged. "I like to watch you."

"It's great to be in a drive," said Helen, remembering experiences of her own last summer.

"I don't know," said Judith, never pausing in her long rhythmic strokes. "A steady pace suits me better. But I'm not choosing to-day."

"Why do you hurry?" Anne asked.

"My folks are coming Saturday."

"Day after to-morrow! Oh, jolly!"

"It will be jolly if I can get ready for them."

"Where's Jack?"

"Gone to pack them up. He's got his hands full. We didn't plan to move 'em quite so quick."

Judith explained about the family that wanted the house in Racefield. "It's luck in one way," she

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finished. "It will save us good money. Yes, it's luck. I'd sort of hoped to get things all ready, everything from up there put in its place down here. No confusion. No muddle of duds sitting round waiting to go nobody knows where. Then Jack should bring Mother French down. That's the way I'd planned it. Kind of a dream, I guess. Well, we can get her room in order, that's one thing sure. And she won't mind. She's not the sort that fusses if there's a pin set crooked in a cushion. And I can't expect to have everything go my way—all the little things, when I've got the big things."

"Yes, you can," Helen cried. "You can, if it's just settling this house you mean. Couldn't you get it done the way you want it, if we helped?"

"We should like to help," said Anne quietly.

Judith put down her cloth and lifted to the two a sunny face. "If that ain't just like you! You sure are the beatingest girls that ever lived. I don't seem ever to get used to you, now do I?"

"Then you will let us!"

Judith bent a keen glance on the girls. "I wasn't bidding for an offer."

"We know that."

"Settling a house is hard work. I haven't ever done it, but I know."

"It won't be hard work if we all help," Helen

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urged. "This house especially. It's a doll's house. Why, settling this house will be play!"

"I never settled a house," said Anne. "Please let us help, Judith."

"I guess you really mean it," said Judith, "but you don't know ——"

"Of course we mean it!"

"You don't know just what you're getting into. Better ask your mother and Mr. Lathrop."

"We'll ask them," Helen promised.

"We know now what they will say."

"You do, do you?" Judith went back to her mopping. "Saturday is going to be my busy day. There won't be more than I can manage before then."

"What is it you're going to do before?"

"Wash the windows and clean up-stairs. That's a job I can handle."

Helen pinched Anne and the two smiled at each other furtively above Judith's bent head.

"We must be going now. Perhaps we'll look in on you this afternoon."

Safely out of the house and on the front walk they exchanged confident glances.

"Gay's first," said Helen.

On the way they annexed Grace and Sally. The five then collected Mary Tracy and the six proceeded to Estelle Lawrence's.

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"If Judith's bound to adopt these people," said Grace, when the story had been retold again, "I don't see but it's up to us to help her out. We got her into this fix. We told her about Jack French."

"I wish you wouldn't keep calling it a fix, Grace," Helen remonstrated. "Judith's happy."

"Maybe she is now."

"No dark hints allowed, Gracie," ordered Gay. "Judith knows what she's about. Who votes that F. O. C. turn into a society of scrub-ladies?"

Grace's delicate nose elevated itself disdainfully. "I hate dirty water and black soppy cloths. They ruin your hands."

"Empty your pail often," said Mary. "That's the way our scrub-woman does."

"Judith said she didn't need help before Saturday," Sally suggested.

"She said not, but she's going to get it," said Gay. "I'm about to call for volunteers. All who want to help scrub Judith's playhouse, stand up."

Estelle rose promptly. "I love to clean house and I never get enough of it to do at home."

"I'm a dabster at paint," Spud said rising.

"It's all fresh down-stairs," Helen told her.

"What about up-stairs?"

"There'll be enough to do up there. I don't know that I'm a dabster at anything, but I know

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how to do a good many kinds of things and some of them I like," Helen confessed honestly.

"I do not know how to do anything, but I can watch the rest of you and copy," said Anne.

"I get more than I care for at home, but this is going to be a lark, so I'm in for it," Sally remarked, joining the volunteers.

"I adore cleaning windows," Gay announced. "I prefer cleaning windows to anything I can think of except reading a book. Oh, and going to Anne's coal-scuttle fudge-party. Therefore I shall head the procession. Better tag along, Gracie."

"I don't see that there will be much left for Judith to do," said Grace.

"Judith will be grand master of ceremonies, and chief potentate of the what-goes-where. You'll miss something if you miss this, Gracie. Who said we had got Judith into a mess and F. O. C. ought to see her through?"

"I can say that and say too that I hate slopping around with wet cloths, can't I?" Grace was obstinate.

Promptly at two o'clock a little procession filed up the path between the syringa bushes. Gay led it in her most prankish manner. Grace brought up the rear, obviously without enthusiasm. Plainly she wished to be neither where she was

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nor yet anywhere else. Each girl carried under her coat a long print apron. Helen and Estelle and Mary bore ungainly paper packages. Sally had a brown roll that defied conjecture.

"What's that about a fudge-party?" Grace pricked up her ears.

"Helen said we looked like one."

"Just some of Gay's foolishness. This is much nicer, anyway, Grace."

Anne displayed a black rod with two different brush attachments, which she explained she had selected from a closet full at home.

"Do you think these are right, Gay?" she asked anxiously. "It was awfully hard to choose."

Gay herself sported a new pail half full of old cloths and was inclined to make fun of the girls who had concealed theirs in paper.

"What's the matter with a pail?" she demanded twirling hers at arm's length. "Nice little pail! Shiny little pail! Blessums heartums. Didums want to go to Judith's house and clean windows? So ums should. And not be shut up in any old brown wrapping paper, either."

"Gay!" expostulated Estelle and Mary. "You absurd thing!"

"Absurd! Did you hear that? Absurd!" Gay addressed the pail in mock indignation. "They're jealous, that's what they are. Jealous! I know

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why, tootsey-wootsey, pailey-wailey. Theirs are old black scrawny pails, not nice new shiny pails like Gay's own treasure. That's what theirs are. So they do 'em up. To hide 'em! To hide 'em! Blessums ——"

"If you don't stop, I shan't be able to go another step, Gay." The words issued in little gasps between Helen's laughter.

"S-s-sh!"

The giggles ceased.

Solemnly the seven lined up before the door of the little house. Gay tipped her hat on one side, readjusted her hair rapidly, and rang the bell.

"Gay!"

"Oh, you sight!"

"S-s-s-s-s-s-sh!"

The door opened.

"Fine day, mum! Be you needin' a scrub-lady the day, mum?" Gay's accent was a perfect copy of the speech of the woman employed in that capacity by her mother.

Judith laughed delightedly.

"Ain't no cause for to be laughin', mum. I'm a self-respectin' widdy, that's what I be. 'N' these along o' me, they's as self-respectin' as I be. Shame on ye, mum, for shakin' y'r sides at the expense o' the poor."

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"If you could see yourself," grinned Judith. "You're great girls. I always said you were great girls."

"Is it seein' ourselves you'd be havin' us, mum? Sure, an' the likes of us ain't got no time to be grimacin' at ourselves in a mirror, we ain't. We're harrrd-workin' women, we be. Got any work for us, mum? That's what we're askin' o' you the day."

They trooped past Judith into the little house.

"Oh, how nice and fresh!" Estelle cried.

"What pretty paper!" said Mary.

"Isn't this *cute*!" Sally exclaimed.

Hats and coats came off, aprons went on, pails emerged as by magic.

"Cloths!" Estelle exclaimed. "I wondered what you had in that bundle, Sally."

"I didn't know what else to bring," Sally explained. "Mother said you never could have too many cloths when you cleaned windows. I wish I'd thought of a pail."

"You may use half of mine," Estelle promised her.

Gay turned briskly to the astonished Judith.

"I hereby appoint you Commander-in-Chief of the General Staff and Head of the Order Bureau. Where shall we begin?"

"You don't really mean it!"

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"Do we look as though we didn't mean it?"

Judith's grin again conquered her astonishment. "You look sort of businesslike."

"I'll give you a tip," said Gay. "I'm going to wash windows. Now tell us off to the different rooms."

Talking, suggesting, advising, all together, F. O. C. settled to work. Even Grace succumbed to the atmosphere of enthusiasm, and with her pretty hair covered by a dainty dust cap, which she produced mysteriously from nobody knew where, proceeded with one of Anne's brushes to sweep down the walls of the up-stairs rooms. Grace's motions were as effective as her inclinations had been reluctant. After she had finished the walls, Anne with the other brush took her first lesson in floor-sweeping by Helen's pattern, while Mary industriously scrubbed paint.

Down-stairs Gay and Estelle and Sally started a competition in window cleaning, each trying to see which could finish hers first. As each was at liberty to criticize the others' work, and no window could be considered finished until it was pronounced fleckless by the other two, the game worked very well. Poor Estelle was of course left hopelessly far behind in the race, for this was new work to her. Gay easily finished first. Thereupon she proposed a fresh contest, undertaking to

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do two windows to Estelle's one, and three to Sally's two and to beat them at that. Which she did.

Altogether, F. O. C. spent a very successful afternoon. The feeling that they were helping Judith set a glow about their hearts. The fact that they were all together and as busy as bees made them jolly and contented. The novelty of what they were doing interested some and those to whom it was no novelty enjoyed the spice of an unusual setting for familiar tasks.

"We're coming again to finish up," they told Judith, as they took off their aprons and folded their cloths and collected their brushes.

"There won't be anything much to do before Saturday now," said the blithe young mistress of the house. "You've done it all to-day, there were so many of you. And you've done it fine." She twinkled at them. "I didn't know you could work so well."

"There isn't much we can't do if we set out," responded the president. "In fact, I couldn't mention anything we'd fall down on if we undertook it. That may be a modest statement, but it's just."

"I wouldn't be the one to contradict it," said Judith.

"Saturday the stuff from Racefield begins to

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come, doesn't it?" Gay queried. "What time do you want us?"

"Don will be down," said Judith. "He'll help. Haven't you girls done enough?"

"If you think, Judith French," Gay retorted, "that we are going to keep out of the biggest fun just because you have a cousin to help you—— Well, you'd better put on your thinker the other side out. Wouldn't she, girls?"

"I've always wanted to move," said Estelle, "and my family won't do it."

"So have I," Helen agreed. "Moving must be terribly thrilling. I don't mean I want to go away from home. But I'd like to move out for the sake of moving in again."

Judith glowed at them. "If you feel that way, come along. I don't mind telling you all that I didn't see how I was going to get done what I wanted to get done. I told Anne and Helen before. They're at the bottom of this, I guess. But I don't care, so long as nobody comes here when she'd rather go somewhere else. You needn't be very early, though. The first load won't get in till the middle of the forenoon, if it does then. Jack said he'd hurry down as soon as he got the goods started. He ought to stay and bring his mother, but I guess we'll need him here."

"Why?" Anne asked.

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"To handle the heavy pieces. Don ain't quite big enough for that. Jack's got to come."

Helen turned on Judith impulsively. "No, he hasn't. I have an idea. Tell him not to come! Tell him to stay with his mother!"

"Will your idea work?"

"I'll consult mother, and if she thinks it won't, I'll tell you."

"That's all right, then." Judith turned for a last loving glance before locking the door.

On the steps Grace was saying to Sally, "I never dreamed it was going to be such a cute house. Of course there isn't anything in it now, but the new paper down-stairs makes those rooms look almost furnished. Isn't the paper pretty, Helen?"

"I think so."

"And Judith says the landlord picked it out himself. Did you ever?"

Helen skipped down the steps to hide the mischief in her eyes. "He must be a pretty nice landlord," she called over her shoulder.

That night Judith wrote to Jack French. "This is to tell you," said the letter, "that I am getting along fine, and you need not come down Saturday before you bring 'mother.' (Here I sat a while and looked at that word. I just can't get used to it.) You ought to see all the helpers I had this afternoon. More promised for Saturday. I guess

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you would be in the way. The house looks fine, windows washed, everything spandy. Honest Injun, I don't need you and 'mother' does. Give her my love.

COUSIN JUDITH."

At about the time that Judith wrote her letter Helen was talking with Harry Dolan.

"Do you remember, Harry, when I promised to tell you something, if ever there was anything to tell?"

"Ho! That French puzzle?"

She nodded.

"Run it down yet?"

She began at the beginning and sketched lightly the story of F. O. C.'s search for Judith's relatives.

"We are all going to be there on Saturday," she finished, "but you know moving furniture around isn't very easy, especially if it's heavy. Jack French ought to stay up at Racefield and bring his mother down, and I thought maybe—you said to ask you, you know, if we wanted anything—maybe you could get one or two other boys and ——"

"Come around and set up the duds? Sure we will."

Helen's eyes shone. "Oh, I knew you would! We want to have everything ready when Mrs. French gets here, every single thing, so she will

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feel as though she had always lived in that house, you know."

"Good idea."

"It was Judith's idea before it was ours."

"I don't see as that hurts it. Look here, did that girl really live in an orphan asylum all her life?"

"Since she was a year and a half old."

Harry whistled. "Tough luck. I'll speak to Knowles and Canney, Gray too."

Helen pondered a moment. "Don't you think it would be nice to—to keep—that is, not to have that story get out all over town?"

"Who's going to tell it?" grimaced Harry. "You girls?"

Saturday morning's sun found the retiring little house on Oak Street exceedingly busy. The lilac buds were swelling and doing their best to hide the weather-beaten walls with a delicate green veil. Robins and an occasional bluebird winged from bush to bush and now and then cocked an inquiring eye toward the windows which stood wide to the spring breeze. Throughout the earlier hours of the forenoon young people were continually arriving in groups of two and three. First, came Judith alone, springing up the path with such a radiant morning face that the robins almost took her for a second sun, on legs, a conclusion which

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was not very far wrong, after all. An hour after Judith came Gay and Mary and Estelle, equipped with mysterious boxes and napkin-covered plates which they deposited in the pantry.

"Mother sent a cake," said Mary. "She thought you wouldn't have time for much cooking to-day."

"Mine's a lemon pie." Estelle permitted a peep apiece through the partially raised lid of the box. "Our maid makes luscious lemon pies."

"I've brought doughnuts," Gay announced. "Is it coals to Newcastle, Judith?"

"Indeed and it's not. I didn't get to doughnuts yesterday. My, don't they look good! And to think of your folks sending 'em."

"Mother said hungry boys could eat faster than one girl could cook," laughed Gay.

"It's going to take 'em a little while to do it, though." Judith waved an arm at the pantry shelves.

"All done yesterday?"

"All yesterday."

"Put in the whole day, didn't you?"

"That was about it."

Next, Grace and Sally appeared, carrying between them a basket containing more doughnuts and three glasses of currant jelly. Ten minutes later, Anne and Helen, frisking along empty-handed, and very much afraid that they might

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have missed the arrival of the first load, because Helen had stayed to complete her Saturday morning tasks at home. "I hurried just as fast as I could," she reported breathless.

And then at last, after half a dozen false alarms, there really was a heavily loaded cart in the street, a cart piled high with helpless furniture, roped to safety and sticking its legs out ridiculously. Moreover the cart was passing all the other houses and, yes, now it was actually stopping at Judith's gate. A thin, wiry boy, with a fiery red topknot, and big ungainly hands and feet protruding from a coat and trousers too short for him, slipped awkwardly from beside the driver, looking as though he would rather run away than be engulfed by the stream of girls pouring from the house.

"Pat!" Judith cried. "It's Pat instead of Don. Hurrah for you, Pat! You're the boy to tell us where everything belongs."

Helen was waving eagerly to a group advancing up the street, and suddenly Pat discovered the ratio was not one to eight. Five to eight was much better. He forgot how many extra hands and feet he had. He forgot that his new cousin wasn't a boy, too. He pulled off his coat the way the other fellows were doing and, scrambling up on the load, began unknotting cords.

There was no lack of things to do from that

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moment. The boys unloaded the cart and distributed its contents through the house under the supervision of the girls.

"Mother's room," Pat would say of a bedstead. "That's Helen," Judith would supplement hastily, and Harry Dolan and Phil Knowles would turn to the left where Helen stood in the door of "mother's room."

Or Pat would say, "Kitchen," and Judith would add, "Gay," and George Gray and Jim Canney would bear the table they were guiding up the steps and through the house under Gay's direction to the kitchen.

Under this system surprisingly few articles went wrong and there was little confusion. With the cart unloaded, the boys helped the girls arrange the different rooms, and by the time that was done there was another load waiting at the door to undo all the arrangement. Before anybody dreamed it could be time, noon had come and healthy appetites, fed by vigorous exercise, were demanding satisfaction.

How hands flew in the afternoon! There was so much to be done after the last load arrived and so little, so fearfully little, time to do it in. But nobody grew discouraged. Tongues flew as fast as fingers and laughter rang joyously through the house. If one made a mistake it was only a deli-

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cious joke. If one didn't, somebody else did, and the joke was as good. In the atmosphere of good-fellowship Pat forgot his shyness and nobody reminded him of it. Pat was a "duck," the girls said. Nobody was so handy as Pat, if a chair had broken its leg or a table had dislocated its hip.

At three o'clock it seemed as though the house would never be "settled." At four o'clock Helen and Anne began to make the beds. At five shelves were still going up in the kitchen. At half-past five Estelle and Gay set the table and Grace dashed out hastily to procure a red geranium.

"It will look so cheerful in the kitchen window," she explained as she fled.

At a quarter of six, John arrived bearing a big covered platter which he delivered to Judith with "Mr. Lathrop's compliments, and will Miss French do him the honor to accept a trifling contribution to her house-warming." The platter bore a steaming brown turkey.

At twelve minutes of six Anne vanished, to reappear eight minutes later with both hands full of yellow daffodils. At ten minutes of six the twins trotted up the path with a hamper of hot rolls and "mother's love to Judith." At three minutes of six the turkey was on the stove keeping hot, the rolls were doing likewise in the oven, the table was set for seven, Anne was arranging the

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daffodils, Judith was lighting the lamps, Sally and Helen were taking a last "look around" up-stairs, the boys were picking up the front path and stowing burlap, ropes, and odds and ends in the shed, Gay and Estelle were in the pantry opening the jelly and piling plates high with doughnuts and cake, and Grace was arranging her red geranium at precisely the right angle in the kitchen window.

"Oh!" cried Judith, clasping her hands joyfully. "Oh, ain't it beautiful! And it's just the way I wanted it to be. It's just right."

"It sure is," echoed Pat from around the corner of a doughnut. "Mother'll like it. I guess she'll be s'prised." He bolted for the street and a post of observation.

Helen and Sally descended the stairs, taking a look at "mother's room" before turning into the living-room.

"Doesn't it look nice!" Helen cried. "Oh, Anne, don't you like it?"

Anne pulled one of the daffodils out of the vase on the dining table and started with it toward Mrs. French's room. She nodded happily at Helen as she passed.

"Honk, honk! Honk, honk!"

"Coming!" yelled Pat, sticking his red head through the open front door.

The honking stopped at the gate. Presto! It

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might well have been the imperious twelve of Cinderella's fairy ball. Judith rushed to the front door, but everybody else rushed to the back. Helter skelter they tumbled out, thrusting their arms into coats, pinning on hats as they went.

"S-s-sh!"

Stealthily, a-tiptoe, boys and girls together, they stole around the back of the house, climbed a fence, ran pell-mell through two neighboring yards, and halted behind a screen of bushes up the street. From there they reconnoitered, breathless but triumphant.

"There's 'mother'!" Helen cried. "Look! Jack is carrying her in. Judith's got the baby. Oh, wouldn't you like to creep up and peek!"

Anne took her hand. "Come home," she said firmly. "Come home quick."

CHAPTER XIV

FRENCH, FRENCH & COMPANY

THE dishes were washed, wiped, and put away in the little house under the big sycamore. Don and Pat had done them together, while Judith put the baby to bed.

Jack hailed the boys as Pat hung up the dishpan and Don scraped the sink.

"Come in when you're through. I'm calling a meeting of the clan."

Don nodded. "When does she open up?"

"In five minutes sharp."

"We'll be there in one."

When they entered the front room Judith was smoothing the between-meals table-cloth of brown linen and Jack was returning the lamp to position. Don and Pat moved their mother's chair within the circle of lamplight, Nick ran for her sewing basket, and the French family dropped to seats at attention.

"I've called this meeting," Jack said, "because, as you all know, we're up against an experiment, and if we're going to pull it off, it's my idea that we've got to do it together."

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Mrs. French laid her sewing in her lap and turned her face on her son. Don and Pat and Nick eyed their brother eagerly. Judith nodded.

"We've managed so far to stick together," Jack continued. "Two weeks ago I thought we hadn't a chance. Then Cousin Judith stepped in and discovered us. It was the luckiest thing that ever happened to us. We don't want her to be sorry she did it. We've got this house to live in and Cousin Judith is going to run it for us. She is going to run it on what we give her. I have a good job, but I can't give her enough. If I could, there wouldn't have been any question of sticking together. There are a good many of us, you know, and we eat a lot. We have to eat a lot to do our work. Don and Pat have to go to school. Next year Nick will go. Don thinks he ought to stop at the end of this year, but we don't want him to do that, if we can help it. I want all you fellows to have at least a high school education. But that's ahead of us. The point is, we must run this house and take care of ourselves on what we can earn, or—break up. That's the long and short of it. We have this summer to see whether or not we can do it. The only way to do it is to get together and work together. Does everybody agree so far?"

"Sure."

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"That sounds O. K."

"It's true, Jack."

Even Nick, feeling very old and grown-up over the responsibility that rested on his small shoulders, gave assent to Jack's words.

The keen dark eyes of the head of the family traveled searchingly around the intent circle. He seemed to be focussing attention on something important to be said.

"If we want to put this thing through we've got to pool our funds."

They waited for him to go on.

"I mean this," said Jack. "Every one of us who can earn something must turn in all the money we earn to—say Cousin Judith. She divides it around, so much for rent, for food, clothes, coal and wood—all the expenses we can foresee. So much for extras. So much to lay by. She makes out the budget and we live by it. What do you say, mother?"

Mrs. French was smiling delicately, proudly, delightedly at her oldest son. "I think it is a wonderful plan."

"I'd rather not do it alone," Judith remonstrated. "You help, Jack."

"All right. You and I will make out the budget together. But you hold the purse-strings."

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"Have we got to turn in all we earn?" Don asked anxiously.

"Any objections?"

"A fellow likes to have a little in his pockets."

"Why not make that one of the items on the budget?" Judith suggested. "Spending money?"

"It will have to be a mighty small item," Jack retorted. "Pretty near too little to see."

"Just enough to rattle," Pat pleaded.

"I'll tell you," said Judith. "Let's form a company, a business company, you know. We'll set down on a paper just how much money is put in every week and who does it. On the same paper we might put down how much we think is going out the next week and what for. Then when the week is up we can have a meeting and report."

"Good scheme." Jack's dark face kindled. "French, French & Company. Every member of the family belongs to it. All in favor of forming the company say aye."

"Aye!"

"Aye! Aye!"

"The ayes have it. Understand, now, we're a company. Every fellow that puts in any money holds stock and has a vote, or votes, controlling the action of the company."

"What's stock?" murmured Nick.

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"I don't just know," Judith told him, "but it sounds nice."

"Cousin Judith ought to vote," said Gordon, "even if she doesn't put in any money."

"Of course," Jack answered. "Stock in this company may also be acquired by putting in a certain amount of time to further the interests of the company. Cousin Judith puts in about all the time she has, barring a couple of hours in school and a couple more for study."

"I study more than that," Judith defended.

"Her votes will equal those I get for my wages at the garage."

"That's not fair."

"Yes, it is. You're contributing as much as I am. Isn't she, mother?"

"You both are doing far more than I wish you were. Where would we be without my big son and my new daughter?"

Judith leaned over and patted Mrs. French's hand joyously.

"Will I have a vote?" Nick piped.

"You certainly will," Jack told him. "Who runs errands and sweeps the porch and tends door for mother?"

"And puts away dishes for Judith and picks up the kindling wood and does lots of nice things?"

"Each share of stock in this company stands for

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five dollars," Jack announced. "That's fair, isn't it? That is, we each have one vote for every five dollars' worth of time or money we contribute to the company. And that reminds me, all in favor of making Cousin Judith treasurer of French, French & Company, say aye."

The ayes were shouted vociferously.

"My!" said Judith. "I'll feel so big being treasurer, you may have to put me out of the company. 'Tisn't safe, I don't think."

"I'll risk it. Now then, any other ideas, treasurer?"

He looked at her until she jumped. "You mean me, don't you? I guess I'm not used yet to being a treasurer. But I think we'd better have a place on that paper you were talking about where we can put down pocket money. Then at the end of the week, if anybody has some he didn't spend, he can turn it into the fund that's laid by and let it count on getting him another vote."

"Cousin Judith, you ought to be running a corporation."

"That's a kind of business, ain't it, Jack? Well, then, I'm treasurer of a corporation now."

Pat and Don cheered lustily.

"And I do think," Judith added earnestly, "that we want to put all the money we possibly can into the place on the budget that says 'laid by.'"

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Living's cheaper in summer than winter and Don and Pat can earn more, because they won't be in school. We must save all ways we can this summer to help us through next winter without taking Don out of school."

"We might have a garden," suggested Pat. "There's room enough behind the house."

"That's the talk!" Jack approved. "We will have a garden."

Judith beamed. "We can 'most live off it, come summer, and I'll can beets and peas and corn and things to eat next winter. A garden will save lots."

"It ought to be spaded right away," said Pat. "The man next door spaded his before breakfast yesterday. No bigger'n a pocket handkerchief, his is."

"Ours is going to have some size to it," said Jack. "I'll look up seeds to-morrow."

"You'd better not buy any until we measure the ground and see how long rows we'll have," Judith suggested.

"That's right, too. How'd you come to know about gardens, Judith?"

"Oh, they had 'em at the asylum. Vegetable gardens. No flowers. We'll have some flowers in this one, won't we, mother?"

"Flowers will be very nice, dear. They make a house look like home."

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"Then we don't need 'em," Judith declared, "as long as we have you. But I guess we'll throw in a few for luck. There are a lot of bushes against the end fence. Currants and raspberries. I didn't know 'em all. And a grape-vine."

"Hooray!" yelled Don and Pat. "Us for jelly. Hooray!"

"I have some very fine recipes for jellies and preserves that I used to make," remarked Mrs. French.

"We'll make them together," said Judith promptly.

"There was a plum conserve—I don't suppose we have any plum trees, have we?"

"There are a lot of little fruit trees back of the house," Judith told her. "I don't know what kinds. We didn't have fruit trees at the asylum."

"I think they are plum and cherry," said Jack.

"The plum conserve was particularly delicious." A faint color had stolen into Mother French's cheeks. "The recipe was a secret in my mother's family."

Judith clapped her hands. "A secret. Just think of that! And you're going to tell me. You didn't say that though, did you?"

"Indeed I shall tell you. How else would we make it?"

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"We'll be a company within a company—the Plum Conserve Company. My, but it sounds good!"

"We haven't a president," said Jack. "After we elect, I must go over to the garage. Got some work to do."

"You're the president," Judith flashed at him. "Isn't he, boys?"

"Sure!" they agreed.

"What's mother?" Nick asked.

"I know." Don lifted his head with a quick shy gesture of affection. "She's honorary president. That's what mother is."

Mrs. French smiled tranquilly on them. "I accept the office with pride. For it is an honor, a great honor, to be connected in such a way with French, French & Company."

Jack arose and swept his mother a deep bow. "The honor is ours, madam."

Judith watched the scene eagerly. She was beginning, as the first strangeness wore off, to get many glimpses below the surface of family intercourse, and what she saw hinted at more of which she could only guess. Jack, his dark face glowing, saluting with mischievous yet very real deference the gentle, delicate-featured lady in the chair, looked a very different Jack from the somewhat care-worn taciturn chauffeur of Stevenson's Garage. The

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younger boys, grinning approval, conveyed by their very nonchalance an air of familiarity with such episodes. It was the way of the family, their attitudes seemed to say. Already Judith had detected in these "fifth cousins" a gentility, a mutual courtesy and high humor, which awoke a hitherto unsounded note in her own nature. "They're different," she said, "different from any people I ever saw before in my life. But you wouldn't know it just to look at them."

Jack turned to the door and Don rose to follow him. "If you're going to the garage, Jack, I'm coming, too."

Pat made for the opposite door. "Guess I'll be looking up our spading fork."

Nick bravely tried to hold his eyes open when Judith looked at him.

"Do you know anybody," she inquired gravely, "who doesn't want to go to bed?"

When Judith came down-stairs Mrs. French put out her hand and drew the girl down until she could kiss her cheek.

"You have put new life and hope into us all, dear," she said. "Best of all, you have given me a glimpse of my old Jack. I had lost sight of him lately in an anxious stranger."

Judith scarcely heard the words for the caress on her cheek. She always thrilled to the touch of

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Mrs. French's lips. "Mrs. Thayer did it once," she thought, "and now Mother French does it every day. Twice to-day. Twice. I guess I'm not an orphan any longer."

CHAPTER XV

THE TWINS MAKE A CALL

THE twins hopped down the path to the gate, hopped up on the gate, and began to swing. It was a holiday and it was spring and the twins knew it. That is, they knew it was Saturday and they knew that the odd brown bundles called bulbs which they and their mother and Helen had put into the ground last autumn were now doing just what Helen had said they would do. They were brown bundles no longer, but leaves and flowers, yellow and white and pink. The twins had spent hours watching those bulbs, hours that resulted from the addition of many small fractions of time. They had announced with jubilation the appearance of the first green points and had hung in palpitating excitement over the swelling buds.

This morning more than bulbs were required to content them. They wanted to do something they had never done before and they wanted to do it quick. This also was due to the spring, but the twins did not know that. They took turns swinging on the gate and pondered.

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"I know," Tess announced suddenly. "Let's go see Judith 'n' those boys."

Ted considered. "We went there once. I bet I could 'member the way."

"The boys hadn't come then, only one of 'em." Tess jumped down from the gate and started up the path. "Hurry up and ask mother!"

Ted galloped after her. They made a race of it and Tess won.

Mrs. Thayer listened smilingly. "You may go for an hour," she said, "if you will be careful not to get in anybody's way. Can I trust my twinnies to come home if they see Judith's cousins are too busy to have them about?"

The twins promised.

"May we stay till twelve o'clock?" Tess pleaded. "If they'd like to have us?"

"It's awful hard to tell an hour," Ted explained, "when there ain't any noise to go by."

"There's whistles at twelve o'clock," Tess added.

"Twelve o'clock then, if they are not too busy. And—twinnies!"

They returned reluctantly.

"Are you sure you remember the way?"

"Certain sure."

"Just tell me."

They told her, both together, at top speed.

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"Don't forget before you cross any street to look both ways and see if there are autos coming."

"We won't forget, honest we won't."

"And—twinnies!"

Again they retraced their departing steps.

"Give my love to Judith and tell her that she is to send you home if you are in the way."

"Yes'm. Maybe Judith won't be there."

"Then do what Mrs. French tells you. Twin-nies!"

They paused in the doorway this time.

"Are your hands clean?"

Four palms shot out in evidence.

"They might be cleaner. I think you'd better wash them. And don't forget the soap."

"When I'm a man," Ted declared as he scrubbed hastily, "I'm never goin' to wash myself, not never."

"Not when you get up in the mornin'?"

"Not when I get up in the mornin'!"

"Then I shan't play with you," said Tess. "You'd be a dirty man, if you didn't wash at all."

"Maybe I'll wash once," Ted conceded. "Maybe I'll wash when I get up—just once."

"You didn't do the backs of 'em." Tess pointed.

"I ain't a-goin' to."

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"O-o-o-oh!"

He snatched the soap. "There now!"

"'Bye, mother!"

"Good-bye, twinnies."

They pranced forth jubilantly.

"Beat you to the corner!" Ted cried.

They reached it abreast.

"Watch out now!" warned Tess.

Hand in hand, they stood poised, scanning the street. Then they scampered across the road and danced on up the sidewalk.

In front of the little house whither they had brought the rolls, the twins paused to reconnoiter. The door stood open, but there was no one in sight, not even a cat.

"Orter be a cat," Ted grumbled.

Hand in hand once more, sedately now, the twins paced up the path between the budded syringas. At the open door they paused again.

Ted nudged Tess. "You do it!"

Tess nudged Ted. "No, you!"

"We might try the back door," he suggested.

She pulled the bell. Their hands gripped tighter as they waited. Their eyes rounded in half fearful expectation.

Steps crossed the floor, odd steps, slow, light, a bit uncertain. Into the hall before the open door toddled a brown eyed baby in checked rompers.

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He halted a moment, only to advance, smiling chubbily.

“Coom in!” said the baby gravely. “Coom in!” He put out his hand. “Take off oo sings.”

Tess hugged him on the spot and he laughed at her adorably.

“Coom an’ play,” he commanded. “Dick wants to play.”

“That’s a nice kid,” Ted approved.

The twins, convoyed by the baby, straggled across the threshold into a room where a lady sat in a chair, sewing. The lady did not get up, but she smiled at them. By this the twins knew her for the lady who could not walk. Helen had told them about her, but she had not been able to tell them why she could not walk. It was a matter that exercised the twins’ curiosity greatly. The minute they saw her face they made up their minds to ask her—some time.

Tess advanced politely. “I’m Tess and this is my brother Ted. Mother said we might come and play, if we’d mind you. We can stay till twelve o’clock, if we don’t bother.”

“I am sure you won’t bother,” said the lady, nodding pleasantly. “What is your last name, dear?”

Before they had time to answer Judith was in



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the room. The twins liked Judith. She always treated them as though she and they were exactly the same age.

"Why, it's the twins!" Judith cried. "I wondered how long before you'd get around to come to see us. Helen Thayer's brother and sister, mother. You've heard Helen speak of the twins."

"Indeed I have!" said the sitting-down lady. Her voice held a warm note that the twins liked. They, too, wondered why they hadn't come before. "Dick went to the door, dear."

"I might have known Dick would tend door when my fingers were all dough." Judith picked up the baby and snuggled her face into his neck. His laugh rang out lustily.

"Nick is in the kitchen," said Judith. "Don's in the wood-shed. Pat's away working this morning."

"Pat has red hair," Tess observed.

"Yes. He's the one you know."

"What's he doing?" Ted asked.

"Cutting folks' grass. Mr. Lawrence sent around this morning, mother, to know if Pat could take his on. Pat will have his hands full at this rate."

"That's better than having them empty, daughter."

"Lots better." Tess noticed that Judith dropped a kiss on the sitting-down lady's cheek.

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"Does he do it with one of those machines that has knives?" Ted inquired.

"Cut the grass? That's just what he does it with."

"I'd like to be him!" said Ted.

"So'd I," said Tess. "It must be fun to run one of those machines."

"Pat's doing it for the money," said Judith. "People pay him when he cuts their grass."

"Much as a nickel?" queried Tess.

"Ten times a nickel."

The twins blinked. Pat appeared to them in the guise of a millionaire. But that was part of the pleasure of being in Judith's company; you made so many interesting new discoveries.

"You know where to find the boys when you want them," Judith said. "Now I must go back to my baking. I shouldn't wonder if there'd be a cooky ready by and by. I left Nick cutting them out."

It was always like that in Judith's house, the twins found. She told you where you could lay your hands on people and things and left you to select for yourself. It took Ted and Tess very little time to decide to investigate Nick and the kitchen. Nick proved to be a slender boy, not so brown as Ted, nor so quick as Tess, but with a positive genius for cutting out cookies. He made

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dogs and cats and even boys that you knew at once for the things they were meant to be. Ted and Tess tried to compete with him and failed lamentably. But if they could not mould, their ability to eat was unhampered. They ate until Judith steered them dexterously on to Don in the wood-shed.

Don was tinkering a bicycle. Even cookies pale before a bicycle in pieces. The twins squatted beside Don and asked questions, and Nick squatted beside the twins. It was a wonderful morning. Twelve o'clock put an end to it altogether too soon. The twins could not believe that it really was twelve o'clock until the noon whistles had driven them to consult the clock in the kitchen. Even then they thought that the clock must have made a mistake.

"Why, we've only been here a minute!" Ted exclaimed.

"One teenty minute!" Tess echoed.

They went home with their heads full of ideas. At dinner they unloaded as many of these as possible on their mother and Helen.

"Don's doin' bicycles," Ted finished. "He buys 'em when they're no good 'n' fixes 'em up. He picked one off a nash heap, he did, 'n' fixed it up good as new, 'n' sold it for ten dollars!"

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"Ten dollars!" Tess squealed. "An' it didn't cost him a cent."

"Not a cent," Ted reiterated. "Gee, I'd like to make money!"

"Mayn't we, mother? Mayn't we?" they besought together.

"May you what?"

"Mayn't we make money? The way those French fellows do," Ted finished.

"When you are a little older," said Mrs. Thayer.

"Seems if every single thing we wanted to do we can't 'cause we're not old enough," grumbled Tess.

"Wisht we could grow a year in one night," said Ted.

"Ho! I'd grow two!" squealed his twin. "I'd grow three, four, I'd grow six years! That's how much I'd grow all in one night."

Debating this possibility, the two regained their good-nature. They continued to debate it under the lilacs after dinner until Ted ended the whole discussion.

"Huh!" he said, "what's the use talkin'? I s'pose we'll go creepin' 'long just the way we always have."

Dejection again shadowed their spirits.

"It don't seem so awful hard," Tess said at last.

"What don't?"

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"Earnin' money, the way Don does."

"He said 'twasn't hard," said Ted.

Tess's eyes brightened. "He told us how he did it, too."

Ted nodded. "'You get somethin' old,' he said, 'n' no good, 'n' you fix it up——'"

"'Good 's new,'" interpolated Tess.

"'Good 's new, 'n' then you sell it for four, five times what you gave for it.'"

"That's what he said," Tess agreed proudly.

"Let's do it."

"Let's."

"Where you goin'?"

"To shake some money out of our bank."

"We shook some out last week," he reminded her.

"It rattled this mornin'; I tried it."

They clattered up-stairs and gained the bank. The noise of its contents revealed an all too roomy interior. The twins shook briskly, turn and turn about, until they had abstracted six pennies.

"Guess that's enough," said Ted. "Come on an' spend it."

"What'll we get?"

"I dunno yet."

"Mother'll be s'prised."

He admitted the fact.

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"Dot's got a doll with an arm gone. I don't s'pose she'd sell it."

"We don't want any old doll."

"No, I guess we don't."

"Ben Page broke his 'locipede."

"Why, Ted Thayer, you know that 'locipede wasn't any good to start with!"

"I bet Ben'd sell it cheap," Ted argued.

"Don found that bicycle on a nash heap," Tess reminded him.

Ted brightened. "That's so," he agreed. "Let's look."

The twins, who knew to a detail the possibilities of every yard on the street, trotted off hopefully. The solitary ash pile of their acquaintance had hitherto never impressed them as concealing magnificent booty, but that was very likely due to the fact that they had not understood what to expect. Now that they knew the capabilities of ash piles they might find something. Alas! This ash heap yielded no treasure, though they picked it over carefully, coal by coal, and even prodded it with sticks.

"Ain't nothin' here," observed at last a small figure coated with gray ash.

"I 'spect 't isn't the right kind," assented his dusty twin.

"'Spect not."

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The two retired from the ash pile, checked but not defeated.

"Ginger's got a 'spress cart," Ted remarked as they sauntered down the street. "'Tain't no good now."

"Ginger's got chicken-pox, 'n' you can't talk to him."

"Yes, you can, too, through the window."

Obviously there was hope here. The twins repaired rapidly to the corner, and stationing themselves under the window of Ginger's room, fired pebbles at it until Ginger's face appeared in the opening.

"Hello!" said Ginger.

"Hello yourself!" said Ted.

"You can't come up here," Ginger informed them. "If you did, you'd catch it."

"Don't wanter come up," Ted told him. "Say, Ginger, are they bad?"

"Bad 'nough." Here Ginger attempted to look sicker than he felt. "You don't want 'em. Yes, they're sure bad."

Ted wished to ask for particulars, but he kept heroically to the matter in hand. You could not count on such an interview's lasting indefinitely without interruption.

"Where's your 'spress cart, Ginger?"

"In the tool-house. Why?"

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"It's no good."

"Oh, I dunno. It ain't so bad."

"It's all broke up, Ginger Faulkes," Tess admonished him, "an' you know it."

"What'll you sell it for?"

"Sell it nothin'."

"Five cents?"

"Five cents? Sell a 'spress cart for five cents? What's the kid talkin' about?"

"Give you six," said Ted, "an' not another penny."

"That cart's a good cart," said Ginger.

"Bet we couldn't find the pieces if we was to look for 'em," Tess cut in.

"Take me?" Ted demanded.

"Let's see your money."

With some difficulty Ted detached the six pennies from the accumulation of other matter in his pockets and spread them out on his upturned palm.

"They look all right," acknowledged the imprisoned Ginger. "Lift up the third board from the door as you go into the tool-house. There's a tin box under it. Leave the money in that box 'n' put back the board. You'll find the 'spress cart somewhere round. One side's gone an' the back's busted. The handle ain't quite as good as new, either."

Ginger's voice stopped abruptly and the twins

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scampered. Through the window where Ginger had stood descended the tones of Ginger's mother in company with another voice that the twins knew well. It required no particular mental prowess to deduce the fact that Ginger was receiving a call from the doctor.

Ted and Tess lost no time in completing their purchase. The six pennies were deposited in the baking-powder can Ginger had indicated. The express cart, as much of it as could be assembled, was conveyed by its new owners to their own territory. In the Thayer wood-shed, with hammer and nails and the covers of old grape baskets, the twins set to work valiantly. They soon decided that Gordon French came honestly by all the money he earned. If mending old bicycles was harder than mending a broken express cart, Ted and Tess thought Don might profitably try another business. But they were persistent little souls and with the help of some string and a pot of glue, which they purloined from the pantry and whose contents they daubed as plentifully on themselves as on the cart, they achieved at least a working compromise with victory. If not "as good as new," the cart had four sides which held together—one of them, to be sure, so half-heartedly as to indicate great reluctance—and a tongue which had resumed its original length and promised, if given

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careful handling, to keep company for a time, at least, with its body. Furthermore the twins had discovered some red chalk and had retouched the lettering on the side. Inasmuch as the lettering had been nearly obliterated when the cart came into their possession, this was almost an original measure, and the twins loved it accordingly. Indeed there was nothing about the cart they did not admire. Patched and shaky and ramshackle as it was, Ted and Tess saw in it a glorious achievement.

"You have to be a little careful," Tess acknowledged.

"Everybody has to be careful of things," Ted replied with a wisdom he did not always apply.

"Who'll we sell it to?" Tess asked.

"We'll take it out on the street," Ted said. "Maybe somebody'll come along and ask to buy it."

"They will if they see it," said Tess.

The street appeared to be deserted. This was unusual, but those children who were not entertaining chicken-pox at their own homes had gone to the woods in search of spring flowers, an expedition so hastily organized that Ted and Tess in their preoccupation with the ash pile had missed it. For two minutes the twins paraded the street on their own side, carefully leading the express

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cart by its delicate tongue. Then they crossed over and paraded the opposite sidewalk. The twins were not very old and their patience was not long. It relieved them greatly to see Mr. Lathrop.

The twins and Mr. Lathrop were staunch friends. They had been on amicable terms all winter; indeed, the twins had forgotten that there ever was a time when they did not know the tall white-mustached gentleman who lived in the brick house across the street. They frisked up to him now, exercising due care for the cart.

"Want to buy a 'spress cart?" Ted queried.

"Good 's new," piped Tess. Then she corrected herself. "Most as good, anyway."

"You can carry things in it, if you're careful," Ted urged.

Tess smiled bewitchingly. "Are you goin' to move?"

"Er—I had not thought of doing so."

"It takes carts to move," Ted jumped at his twin's idea.

"If you weren't goin' far," said Tess, "I 'spect you could put things in here an' just draw 'em right over, cups 'n' saucers 'n' things that break."

"It seems plausible. May I ask why you are anxious to sell?"

They replied in one breath. "To make money."

"Your need, I take it, is urgent."

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They blinked.

"May I ask why you wish to earn money?"

The flood-gates opened. Phrases were flung up on the rising tide of speech. Ted and Tess talked both together at top speed.

"Don does."

"Don does it with bicycles ——"

"—— good 's new. He got ten dollars for one he picked off a nash heap."

"Mother said to wait till we're older, but what's the use ——"

"They all do, 'cept Dick 'n' Nick 'n' the sitting-down lady. I guess Judith don't either, but ——"

"Pat cuts grass, but we'd ruther mend things the way Don does."

"He's got to stop school if he don't make more money."

Before the twins knew it they were sitting, one on either side of Mr. Lathrop, on the marble steps behind the iron fence, rehearsing, turn and turn about, the story of their visit to Judith's house. In the course of the recital Mr. Lathrop learned much, for the twins' curiosity, always lively, had that morning been particularly insatiable, their questions endless, and Gordon French had found it amusing to answer them as he would not those of an older questioner.

"On the whole," Mr. Lathrop told them at last,

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"I find myself in agreement with your mother. If I were you, I think I would wait a few years before undertaking to add greatly by my own exertions to my income."

"Would you?"

"I certainly would. As for this cart, I have a strong desire to purchase just such an article. I cannot say I was looking for it, but now that I see it, I recognize its utility. May I inquire what price you put upon it?"

Ted and Tess consulted behind cupped hands.

"'Scuse us," they apologized.

"How much is four times six?"

"Twenty-seven," Ted hazarded a hasty guess.

"'Tisn't either. It's nineteen—twenty—twenty-one!" Tess announced.

"It's more'n that."

"Let's ask him."

Appealed to, Mr. Lathrop gravely furnished the required figure.

"I guess we'd better take off a speck," Ted suggested, "'cause you do have to be careful."

"An' 'cause we like him," Tess whispered.

"Twenty-four cents is a nawful lot."

"Make it twenty-two," said Ted.

Tess wagged her head in violent approbation.

Mr. Lathrop settled the account with as matter of fact an air as though he had been paying a bill

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of twenty-two dollars instead of twenty-two cents. Then he shook hands with each of the twins and taking the ludicrous little cart by the tongue went into the house while Ted and Tess frisked home with the proceeds of their afternoon's industry. Their reception, as sometimes happens in this world, varied widely from that which they felt they had a right to expect.

"Oh, mother! mother!" groaned their sister Helen. "To Mr. Lathrop of all people! How could they! I shall never dare to look him in the face again."

Mother herself failed of enthusiasm.

"Well," she said, "if you must cry, run up-stairs to your own room. I am going right over to see Mr. Lathrop. Stay here, children, till I come back."

Times were serious when mother said "children." Their noses pressed against the window-pane, the twins watched her hurry across the street. She was gone a long time, a very long time. When she came back, she was smiling. She sat down in the biggest chair in the room and opened her arms and the tearful twins crept into them. Then mother began to talk gently but decidedly. As she talked the twins saw light, though neither then nor later did they see enough to fathom their sister Nell's agitation.

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Helen was lying face downward across her bed, sobbing hard, when mother and the twins went up-stairs. Mother sent Ted and Tess on to their own room and, sitting down on the bed, patted her daughter's shoulder.

"Cheer up, Nell. I think you may hold up your head again."

Helen groaned. "What does he think of us!"

"What he said was, 'My dear madam, this cart is worth much more to me than what I paid for it.'"

The girl whirled over. "But, mother, how could it be worth anything?"

"I didn't ask him," said Mrs. Thayer. "I did not consider it becoming in the twins' mother to question the gentleman's word. Besides, I saw the cart."

"Mother!"

"Oh, Mr. Lathrop and I talked too, dearie. Yes, I am inclined to believe that from every point of view he was only speaking the truth."

Across the street, Anne's grandfather was occupied at the moment in showing Anne his purchase.

"Those funny twins!" breathed the girl when she could speak.

"I have acquired two new vehicles to-day, Anne," he said whimsically. "This—er—wagon—

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ette and —— Should you care to have an automobile in the family ? ”

“ A big fast one ? ”

“ A very big, very fast one, Anne. ”

“ I should like that, grandfather. ”

“ The next thing, ” remarked Mr. Lathrop, “ will be to find the right chauffeur. ”

“ I know ! ” Anne cried. “ Jack French. ”

“ Possibly, ” said Mr. Lathrop. “ I had thought of his brother Gordon. ”

CHAPTER XVI

THE HERMIT AGAIN

THE treasurer of French, French & Company bent over a column of figures. Her brow was undoubtedly puckered. Nobody had ever seen Judith scowl before. Nobody saw her now. The doors that led out of the pretty blue bedroom were shut and Judith was quite alone.

“There’s no use talking.” Softly she addressed the little round clock on the table. “There’s no use talking. We simply must make more money if we are to get through next winter.”

The clock ticked back at her precisely as it had ticked before. The clock never worried. Judith sometimes could not help it. For one reason, the clock never looked ahead. Calmly and steadily it measured the present hour. Judith enjoyed the present hour to the full. Was not the garden growing so fast you could almost see the green shoots lengthen as you watched? Were not the boys busy adding to their holdings in the company? But the treasurer of a corporation must forecast the

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future as well as enjoy the present. It was next winter that bothered Judith. Next winter was the crux of her hopes and fears.

She put away her paper and the frown vanished from her forehead. It was as though, having stated the fact of need, she erased the worry. If you had to have money, there was nothing to do but get money.

"And Don's not going to quit school, either," she told the clock.

Its round face had nothing to say on the subject but tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. To Judith this must have appeared satisfactory, for she nodded.

"Yes, that's it," she agreed. "Keep on going. Keep on going and do the best you can. We've made out splendidly so far. But we are going to do a little better."

Then she opened the door and went into the kitchen to start supper. Five hungry boys can consume a prodigious amount of food. Their appetites kept Judith's hands as busy as their muscles and brains kept her head.

Sounds from the front of the house announced the arrival of one or more of the boys. Judith's trained ear noted an unwonted exuberance in the tumult. Two minutes later the kitchen door burst open and Don entered walking on his hands, waving his feet in the air. He took a couple of hand-

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springs across the kitchen and came upright before Judith with a bound.

The girl swept him a quick appraising glance and her hold tightened on the saucepan in her hand.

"You've got news—good news."

"Righto. Guess again."

"I can't. Tell me quick."

"It's a job," said Don. "Steady. Begins as soon as I can qualify. That will be in a couple of days, you bet."

"Oh, Don, I'm so glad! But you haven't told me what it is yet."

"Chauffeur. Chauffeur to Mr. Lathrop. What do you think of that, Cousin Ju?"

Judith tried to clap her hands with the saucepan still in her grasp, found the manœuver difficult, and hastily set the skillet on the stove.

"Oh, Don! I didn't know Mr. Lathrop had a car."

"Just got it. A dandy, too. Peacherina. Bet she can beat everything else in this town. Fifty dollars a month—that's me."

"Don!"

"You can salt most of it down for next winter, Miss Treasurer. I'll tell you that right now."

Don blinked at the glory in Judith's face.

"I will. You don't know what a load that's

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taken off my mind. We'll pull through now. I know we'll pull through."

The boy stared at her. "Say, did things look black?"

"For next winter, yes. I couldn't see how — Now I'm beginning to see light."

"Why didn't you tell a fellow?"

"Weren't you doing the best you could? What was the use worrying you?"

"Well, I'm doing better now."

She twinkled joyously at him. "You're doing great."

They shook hands on it emphatically.

"But school!" cried Judith. "What about school?"

"That's all right. I'm to drive the car after school hours for the next fortnight and when fall comes. Mr. Lathrop doesn't want to be out all the time, he says."

Judith returned to her machinations with the saucepan and Don began to wash his hands at the sink.

"I didn't know you could run a car, Don." The girl spoke over her shoulder.

"Jack taught me. I made him. Why, I've known how to run a car 'most as long as Jack has. But I haven't a license. That's what I've got to get before I can touch Mr. Lathrop's. Just wait

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till you see her, Cousin Ju. Gee, but she's a beaut!"

The boy dried hands and face and came over to the stove. "Want me to swish that milk round?"

Judith relinquished the spoon. "I'm so glad, it makes me sort of crazy. Keep it going while I get the potato."

When the two heads bent once more above the stove Don spoke. "See here, if you get worried again—about any old thing—just speak to me, won't you?"

Judith smiled at him. "I will, Don. Yes, I will."

"That's all right then."

Don relinquished the spoon and, hearing Jack's step, sauntered in with mock carelessness to tell him the news, while Judith hastily beat up an omelette.

"We just had to celebrate somehow," she apologized later to an excited tableful, "and now that we're raising our own hens, I guess we can eat all the eggs they'll give us, without stopping to count on our fingers. This is your omelette, Don."

"Sure it's yours, Don," said his brother Jack. "It's yours, and here's to more of 'em!"

The French family ate a jubilant meal. Everybody was hungry and happy and proud. The hungriest may have been the boys, but the hap-

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piest and the proudest was certainly Judith. But then, as she would have explained, she was making up for lost time, and when you have a good deal of lost time to make up for, you have a right to annex the superlatives.

"Just the same," she told the little clock on her table when she went to bed, "I am going down to see Grant and Myers in two or three days. I can't have those boys put in all the money that does this firm's business."

Grant and Myers's was popularly accounted the best grocery in town, and Judith approached it fearfully, but without embarrassment. Judith never thought enough about herself to be awkward or ill at ease. The mere suggestion of an interview in a private office would either have dismayed or unduly uplifted most girls. Judith met it as a matter of course and, following directions, presented to the bald-headed rotund Mr. Myers her usual cheerful front. It was not of him or his partner that Judith was afraid.

"Preserves?" The man writing at the desk echoed her modest question without rising. "Jams? Jellies? My dear young lady, did you look at our shelves?"

Judith privately registered a note that she was not his dear young lady. Aloud she said, "I meant something home-made, sir. That tastes dif-

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ferent from the factory kind, you know. Why, if I had to buy things like that at a store like this store and I found something that tasted as though a real mother had made it, in a real kitchen, cooked on a real stove—a family stove, you know, sir—— Well, if I had money enough I'd buy every bit you had and take it home and just live on it."

Mr. Myers drew his shaggy eyebrows together. "So you'd buy me out, would you, miss?"

Judith's wide smile erased all her freckles. "I would, if I had the money."

Mr. Myers, meeting that smile and the gray eyes that twinkled from the midst of it, like a pair of friendly human stars, shoved his letter aside and wheeled his chair from the desk. "Sit down. Sit down. What do you know about the taste of things that mother used to make?"

"Nothing. That's why I thought folks would like it."

"Oh, you did." Mr. Myers did not know exactly what to understand by this answer, but to his own surprise he did not feel at liberty to press the question. "Well, well. There's something in the idea. I'll not deny it. Those jars on our shelves hold pretty good stuff, though. Brought along any of yours with you?"

"No," said Judith. "But I'll bring you some,

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just as soon as the fruit is ripe. Then you can try it yourself, sir, on your own table, and see if the taste is right."

"You feel pretty sure, young lady."

Judith nodded at him confidentially. "One of the recipes has been a secret in Mother French's family for 'most a hundred years."

"You don't say so! Well, well. If it's all you say, we'll market it for you. Might be able to place it in the city, too. Mind, I'm making no promises. All depends on the stuff. Put it up in fancy jars—something like this." He reached down from a shelf a quaintly shaped blue jar. Beside it he set a curved glass with a screw top. "Jellies in that. Something different. Catch the eye. That's what sells goods. Get the idea? H'm, I thought you would. Well, well. Leave me your name, young lady. And don't forget my samples."

"I won't, sir. And thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet. We'll talk business after I've tasted your wares."

Mr. Myers sat down after closing the office door on his caller, conscious of a distinctly pleasant sensation which he was unable to locate. "H'm," he muttered, inspecting the name and address she had written for him. "H'm. Never heard of her. Judith French. That girl would make a good

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tonic. Takes ten years off a man's shoulders to see her grin. I didn't want her jellies. What do we want of more jellies? Got all we can carry now. It may be good stuff, though. That girl won't try to do business with any but good stuff. You can see it in her eye. Well, well. If it's good, I guess we can sell it for her."

Judith left the store, walking on air, not pavement.

"If we haven't enough in our own garden, I'll buy some berries and plums," the girl thought. "In quantities I ought to get 'em fairly cheap. The boys must have all the jelly they want to eat. Boys like jelly, and I'll not scrimp 'em."

Fingers caught her arm.

"Judith!" cried Anne. "Judith, why don't you speak to us?"

A long gray car was drawn up at the curb, a car filled to overflowing with girls. Don sat at the wheel, grinning. The girls were talking all at once, and, as Judith perceived with surprise, to her.

"What in the world were you thinking about so hard?"

"We called you and called you and you never paid the least attention to us."

"After making us chase you through a whole street, Judith French, I think you'd better explain matters."

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"Hop in quick. Anne's taking us for a ride."

"We stopped at your house and you weren't there."

"Now don't say you can't, because you've got to. We're christening the car. Isn't it splendid!"

Half a dozen hands pulled Judith into the tonneau, while six ecstatic voices pointed out the machine's beauties.

"The chauffeur is all right, too," Anne finished gravely.

Everybody assented jubilantly as the car slipped from between the houses into the beautiful country. Everybody was in a mood to assent to any proposition this afternoon and to do it with emphasis. The young green of trees and bushes, the high blue of the sky and the golden warmth of the sun, the swift easy flight of the car, the fact of their being together,—all intoxicated them. They babbled nonsense.

"Oh, Anne," they said, "we're so glad you have a grandfather."

"And so glad he has a car."

"And a granddaughter, too."

"Oh, Anne, we're so glad we know you!"

Somebody noticed where they were going. "Oh! oh! It's the road to Maywood."

"Here's the spring," Estelle cried. "Now then, look quick, everybody!"

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"Slower, Don," Anne implored. "Slower!"

The car slackened speed. F. O. C. peered searchingly.

"You can't!" Grace cried. "You can't see a single one of those iron animals except these lions at the gate."

"You can hardly see there's any house at all."

Gay waved her hand. "Howdy do, Mr. Hermit?"

"Is that where the hermit lives?" Judith asked Helen. "Where you girls came last February?"

"When he roared at us," Helen said.

"I don't feel the way I did then," Grace remarked. "Now I wouldn't mind going by that house again. That time I—I didn't want to stay anywhere near it."

"We noticed you didn't, Gracie," Gay agreed.

"When we come back," Anne said, "we will come this way. And please go very slowly, Don."

They all thought of it afterward, how gayly and light-heartedly they had twice run by the strange, desolate place, its mysteries hidden from prying eyes by the green curtain of wild grape-vines pendent from the trees behind the wall. Only Judith had grown sober as she gazed.

"Think of living alone in that house when you could patch it up and fill it with folks!" she ex-

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claimed. "It must be awful to want to do a thing like that."

"It suits the hermit," Gay retorted easily. "Your esteemed great-uncle-that-isn't, J. French, doesn't take kindly to callers. He discouraged all our advances."

"We might just as well not have gone," said Estelle. "I dreamed of him for a week afterward."

"Of his roar, Stella? You didn't see him, you know."

"Of his roar," Estelle acknowledged. "That was more than I wanted of the hermit."

"I should say so," Grace cut in. "We didn't gain anything by that trip."

"We found out that he wasn't the great-uncle," said Helen.

"I'm sorry for him," Judith declared. "It makes me feel real bad to think of anybody's living the way he's living. It doesn't seem human, some-way. I wonder, didn't he ever have any folks?"

Afterward they knew that even before they drove by, chattering and peering, tragedy had touched the place guarded by the couchant lions. Tragedy was brooding over it in the sunny afternoon while they jested.

"He was dead then," said Estelle shivering.

"Yes," agreed Grace, "because when they found

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him this morning he had been dead two days, and it was day before yesterday we were by there in Anne's car."

"How did they know it had been two days?" Helen asked.

"They just guessed, I suppose." Grace was never at a loss for a suggestion.

"Think of living so you could die and nobody know it for two whole days," said Gay.

"And then have it only found out by chance," Mary added.

"By chance?" Helen asked.

"The man who has delivered groceries at the hermit's every week as long as he's lived there discovered this week when he got home that he had forgotten to leave one of the things—some cereal, I think father said. It was too late to go back last night so he drove out this morning. He'd never taken things clear up to the house, you know, and he had never once in all these years seen the hermit. His orders were to leave certain things on a certain day in a certain place. Well, this morning when he went back with the cereal he found all the other things just where he left them yesterday. That made him think something might be wrong, so he went up to the house. And he found him."

"Found the hermit?" Sally whispered.

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"Sitting in a kind of garden place, the man said. At least there were a lot of bushes around, with paths running through them ——"

"Where we saw him," Gay interpolated.

"The hermit was sitting in a chair made against a tree. The trunk of the tree made the back of the chair and the arms were branches. The chair faced the east. They think that he was watching the sunrise when it happened."

"I'm glad he was out-of-doors," said Helen.

"Why?" Sally asked. "It seems queer—to die—out-of-doors."

"If you had seen that house close to, you wouldn't ask why," Gay told her.

"I wish we hadn't joked so much about him day before yesterday," said Estelle.

"We didn't joke much," said Sally.

"I waved my hand to him," Gay mourned.

"Judith was sorry for him," Helen reminded them. "Let's remember that."

"Father says that except for you three girls not a soul has seen that man's face for twenty years," Mary remarked.

"My goodness!" Grace said. "Think of not having anybody to talk to for twenty years."

Nobody smiled.

"Grandfather is down there to-day," Anne said. Then they all fell silent.

THE HERMIT AGAIN

Helen wanted to cry. She could not have explained why, but the more she thought of the hermit, the sorrier for him she felt. He had not appeared in the least sorry for himself. That visit to his house last winter, how queer and unreal it seemed in this bright June weather! It had been altogether too real at the time. Now she wondered whether she had not dreamed it. But she could not have dreamed the animals, or that dreadful, breath-catching interview. Even Helen's imagination quailed before the thought of having created that. Besides, Anne and Gay had been in it, too, as far in as Helen herself. And now the man they had gone to see was dead. Dead. It was incredible that anybody could be dead in June.

"Did they find the money?" Grace asked.

"What money?"

"The hermit's, of course, Gay. Under the mattress."

"He wouldn't have kept any money under the mattress," Gay chided. "He wasn't that kind. You'd know, if you had seen him."

"I'll bet he had a lot somewhere."

"I don't know." Helen was feeling a bit at odds with romance to-day. "Maybe he didn't have any money at all—more than enough to live the way he did, I mean."

"Don't you believe it," cried Grace. "Hermits

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always have money. I wonder who'll get it, if he really didn't have any 'folks,' as Judith says."

"I don't see that it matters to us who gets it," Gay asserted, "as long as he didn't turn out to be Judith's great-uncle."

CHAPTER XVII

JUDITH CHOOSES

“DEAR Miss French,” said the note in Judith’s hand. “Will you do me the honor to call upon me this afternoon? The matter I wish to discuss with you compels me to ask your indulgence to this extent. Otherwise I should be giving myself the pleasure of calling upon you. Faithfully, Charles Lathrop.”

John had delivered the letter at the door of the little house on Oak Street. John had handed it in with his most impressive manner. For the matter of that, John never for a moment appeared to forget that he was Mr. Lathrop’s servant and that Mr. Lathrop was—Mr. Lathrop. Explanations were superfluous; Mr. Lathrop required none.

John’s air was quite wasted, so far as Judith was concerned. Judith had a way of looking on all human beings as “folks” without heed to their relationships. But the letter just for a moment frightened her. What did that fine scholarly handwriting cover? Don? “It can’t be anything about Don,” she thought to herself. “Don isn’t

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the kind to get into scrapes, and Mr. Lathrop isn't the kind to come to me about them, either. He'd go to Jack, if he couldn't fix a thing up with Don."

She hid the letter in her dress. Mother French should not know of its arrival yet, not until Judith had seen Mr. Lathrop and fathomed the mystery. Was not Mother French likely to be the very reason why Mr. Lathrop had asked her to come to see him? Nobody could talk over anything in a house the size of this one without confiding in all its inmates. But what of a private nature could Mr. Lathrop have to say to Judith French? Nothing bad. Judith's common sense had disposed of her momentary panic about Don. She both liked and trusted Mr. Lathrop. Unlike the other girls, she had never been afraid of him. Perhaps it was something connected with Anne. But Anne was happy now, happy and content. Well, well, she would soon find out.

"I guess it won't do me any good to worry," Judith said. "I couldn't think out by myself what Mr. Lathrop wants to see me for, not if I thought from now till Doomsday, and I'd be wasting a lot of good time."

She finished her morning's work, went up to school for a couple of recitations, and, coming home, prepared dinner with her usual deft despatch.

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After dinner she rolled out and cooked a "batch" of doughnuts, settled "Dick" for his nap, found a pattern Mrs. French wanted, and helped Nick establish himself with a box of colored clays Jack had brought him for modeling.

"I'm going out a little while now, mother."

"By all means, dear. Stay as long as you like. I am afraid you do not get out enough."

Judith laughed. "I get out a plenty."

"You must not feel tied to my apron strings."

"That's how I like to feel. But I don't. So you needn't worry. Good-bye, mother."

"Good-bye, daughter."

It was exactly, Judith reflected as she skipped down the path between the blossoming syringas, as though they two were really mother and daughter. She could never get quite used to the happiness of it. Always the joy startled her anew, as with the freshness and wonder of a miracle.

"They've been awful good to me," she thought, "Mother French and my fifth cousins. I never s'posed I'd be so happy as I am this minute."

At Mr. Lathrop's John admitted her to the library. Anne's grandfather rose gravely and courteously from his desk to greet her.

"I am very grateful to you, Miss Judith." He placed a chair for the girl with that inimitable manner which Helen loved.

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Judith took it and smiled up at him frankly. "Seems to me that's what I ought to do, if you want to see me—come here. Don's doing all right, isn't he?"

"Finely. Don is a good chauffeur."

"I thought it couldn't be about Don."

"The business matter about which I wish to talk with you, Miss Judith, is nothing which you could by any possibility imagine. I may say I was greatly astonished to learn it myself—pleasantly astonished. I trust it will be equally pleasant news to you."

The blue-gray eyes under the slanting lids were regarding the girl with a very kindly smile.

"I think you had no acquaintance, until after it was perpetrated, with the expedition my granddaughter and several of her friends undertook last February to interview Mr. Marcus French."

"The hermit?" Judith questioned. "No, they didn't tell me beforehand. They went to find me some folks."

"So Anne informs me. I may say that at the time I deeply deplored the incident. I saw in it only the unnecessary baiting of a proud and sensitive man who had sought to withdraw himself from the world's gaze. Now I perceive that, much as Marcus French resented the intrusion on the occasion of its occurrence, nevertheless it furnished

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him with food for thought, and gave his imagination something other than the past to brood upon. This could not but have been a boon to him. Knowing the man as I did more than twenty years ago, I rejoice that before he died he gained at least one interest in the world from which he had chosen to absent himself. You are aware, are you not, Miss French, that the man I am speaking of is now dead?"

"I heard about it," Judith said briefly. Why, she wondered, was Anne's grandfather talking to her of the hermit?

"Though he permitted no intercourse, he disclosed through his will that our former friendship was not forgotten by him. That document names me as one of the executors of its provisions. Coexecutor with me is a cousin for whom Marcus French once cherished an ardent affection. You follow me?"

"I think so, sir." Judith's face was puzzled. "But I don't see what it has to do with me."

"I am coming to that, and I warn you to be prepared for a surprise. Marcus French was in many ways a strange man, eccentric from his youth. The property he left is not, as fortunes are to-day rated, very considerable, but it is more than a competence. He has bequeathed it entirely to you."

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Judith stared, uncomprehending.

Mr. Lathrop repeated his statement, amplifying and explaining.

"There must be some mistake," Judith said at last. "He couldn't have meant me, sir. There's another Judith French somewhere."

"The will describes the beneficiary as a resident of Saybrook. Moreover, it succinctly details the interview of last February to which we have already referred. Permit me to read you the document."

Mr. Lathrop picked up a sheaf of typewritten papers from the desk and began to read. Judith listened, the words whirling giddily through her brain. Senseless though many of them were to the girl, there was no missing their drift, no juggling with the astounding meaning of that sentence, "I do hereby devise and bequeath to the said Judith French ——" No, that Judith French was too plainly indicated for mistake.

Judith blinked. "He means me all right. I see that. What I don't understand yet is why a man who never saw me should want to leave his money to me."

"I cannot perfectly enlighten you. My own understanding of the situation amounts in the final analysis to mere conjecture. A note scribbled by hand on the back of the will says simply, 'I



“HE COULDN’T HAVE MEANT ME, SIR”

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should like to see what the girl will do with herself and the money.' "

Judith waited with questioning eyes.

"Being possessed of some property," said Mr. Lathrop, "Marcus French must necessarily indicate what he wished done with that property after his death. Two alternatives presented themselves to the man who made this will. He might leave his property to institutions, charitable or educational, or he might bequeath it to an individual. For the first course the man I once knew would have had scant liking. He was intensely personal in all his dealings. Instinct and habit would therefore incline him to pursue the second course. But here an obstacle presented itself. This cousin, of whom I previously spoke, his sole surviving relative, is a woman of large property. Personally I am inclined to think that before my granddaughter and her friends acquainted him with your name, he probably intended to mention only this cousin in his will, provided he had heretofore given the matter any serious thought. The Maywood attorney who last month drew up this will" (tapping the document) "informs me that he had executed no previous commission of the kind for my old friend. Indeed, until after Marcus French's death, he was unaware of the identity of the client who had consulted him in his office. Your name, Miss

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French, caught in a memory which for twenty years had been fed no fresh fuel from the world of living men. It is not hard to picture the result. The fires of imagination, which used to blaze high in him, burned fiercely, as I take it, around that name which was also his name. When a man's imagination is involved, he will do strange things. Anne and her friends had told him something of your life. If I recollect Anne's story rightly, they had even acquainted him with the fact that they were in search of a great-uncle. Surely your fancy is as fit as mine, Miss Judith, to cope with the emotions which moved Marcus French. In either case, it is pure fancy. But permit me to say that it is a great pleasure to me to have this occasion to exercise mine."

Judith perceived that Mr. Lathrop meant he was glad of the provisions of the will. "Thank you," she said gravely. All the twinkle was brushed out of her. She struggled to arrange her thoughts in recognizable order.

"Wasn't there some kind of—of conditions, sir?"

"You are to come into absolute control of the property on your twenty-first birthday. Before that all reasonable requests for expenditure are to be honored by the estate, subject to the approval

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of the executors. May I be permitted to ask your age?"

"Eighteen," said Judith. "I'm older than the other girls. I thought you read something about a school." Her mind groped through the fog of undigested words.

"Stanton Hall," Mr. Lathrop explained, "is one of the few boarding-schools which, as I am informed, has held to its standards through a long and honorable life. Marcus French's mother was educated at Stanton Hall. I once had thoughts of sending Anne there. Beyond the stipulation of immediate attendance for at least two years at Stanton Hall, a stipulation which is made obligatory, you are left free to follow your inclinations for the next three years, subject to the approval of the executors of the estate."

Now that facts emerged from the mist, Judith's head was clear. "If I could not go to that school, would I get the money?"

"The condition is explicit," said Mr. Lathrop. "Should you fail to comply with it for any reason save that of physical disability, or should you persist in a course of action disapproved by the executors herein named," he tapped the paper, "the property goes to the cousin I have mentioned." Mr. Lathrop bowed to the girl. "I anticipate no trouble on that score."

HELEN AND THE FIFTH COUSINS

"I thought that was the way you read it, but I wanted to be sure. She'll have to have the money, Mr. Lathrop—that cousin will."

"My dear Miss Judith, I trust I do not understand you."

"I couldn't possibly take it, sir. I couldn't leave my folks."

The eyes of the courtly gentleman and of the freckled girl met squarely. The twinkle was struggling to reassert itself in Judith's.

"It doesn't really matter, Mr. Lathrop," she said earnestly. "I couldn't be any happier, not if I had a million dollars. I'd rather have the folks than the dollars, anyway. Not but what I'm real grateful to him. It'll be something to think about all my life, that a man wanted to leave me his money. Why, it makes me feel as though he had sort of belonged to me, as though he'd been a great-uncle, the way the girls said. I wish he was alive, so I could think up something to do for him. Not to bother him, you know. I wouldn't bother him for the world. I wouldn't try to see him. I'd just—well, I'd send him jellies and jams and never let him know who did it. I'd find something to do." In her earnestness Judith laid her hand on Mr. Lathrop's knee. "You know it isn't that I'm not grateful, sir, that I can't take his money. You do know it, don't you, Mr. Lathrop?"

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His hand closed over the girl's. "Yes, Miss Judith, I know it. But are you quite sure that you cannot comply with the condition?"

"I couldn't be any surer."

"Stanton Hall is a beautiful place. The women at its head are true gentlewomen."

"If it was paradise, I couldn't go," she said.

Mr. Lathrop mused a moment. "I cannot accept your present answer as final. Think it over, talk with your cousins, with any one in whose opinion you have confidence. Later we will speak again of this matter."

He led her to the door and bowed her down the steps. Then he returned to the study and locked up the copy of Marcus French's will from which he had read to Judith. "I trust," he said to himself, "that Miss Judith French will permit me to enroll myself among her friends. Life membership in that girl's good will would be worth a dozen short term intimacies. She shall suit herself about this money, take it or leave it, with her eyes open. I wonder whether they are open, by the way. Perhaps I would better consult Anne."

Judith walked home soberly. What she had heard, while it had not caused the needle of her allegiance to waver for a moment, nevertheless moved her deeply. Her thoughts busied themselves with the strange man whom she had never

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seen but who had taken it into his head to leave her his money. In the light of Mr. Lathrop's words she tried to think herself into some understanding of the inside of that man's head. An impossible task. Judith was too fundamentally unlike the hermit to be able to think as he thought, nor had she the kind of imagination which was Helen's and which might have enabled her to comprehend ways which were totally foreign to her own. But she had sympathy as wide as the world and where she could not understand she always found something to like. Now she liked the hermit, queer and crabbed and unapproachable as he had been. She liked the fact that he had named her in his will.

"There he was a-thinking and a-thinking about me, and I never knew it. Feels good to know he did it, though. Feels somehow as though I'd had folks all along like other girls. I never expected anybody to put my name in a will. I certain sure never thought of a thing like that happening to me."

Then she hurried, lest the boys' supper be late. She did not think of the things she might have done with the money, had she not been treasurer of French, French & Company and therefore responsible to stay in Saybrook and put through the undertaking to which she had set her hand. A

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fact was a fact. It always closed to Judith's mind the road of conjecture. What was the use of inquiring whether or not the traveling was good on some other road, unless you had a chance to go that way? It never occurred to Judith that she might accept the condition of the will and pay some one to take her place in Saybrook. Had it occurred to her, she would have laughed. What, for dollars give up her very own family, that she had just found after a lifetime of loneliness? Had you suggested such a thing, Judith would have told you there wasn't money enough in the world to buy from her these next two years.

The twinkle was back in its familiar place when she reached Oak Street and swiftly began getting supper. Jack, swinging into the kitchen at top speed, saw it and substituted other words for those on the tip of his tongue.

"Joke, Judith! On you."

"On me?"

"About you."

"What is it?"

But Jack's head was already in the wash basin. "Tell you at supper," he gurgled. "It's a good one, too."

"What's the joke?" Don asked five minutes later when the circle around the snowy cloth was complete. "Jack said he had a joke on Ju."

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"Sure I have." Jack turned on Judith. "Heard it on the street to-night. Two fellows congratulated me on having you for a cousin before I had time to get home."

"That's all right," said Pat, "but what did they know about it?"

"Thought it was pretty fine to have an heiress in the family." Jack's dark eyes were mischievous.

"Heiress!" grunted Don. "Who's the heiress?"

"Sitting in Cousin Ju's chair," said Jack. "It's all over town that old French has left her his money. I thought the fellows were kidding at first, but they said no, they'd heard it straight enough. Somebody's been stuffing this town for fair. Didn't break it to you very gently, did I, Ju? Sorry. Hand's new at the business."

"I'd heard it before," said Judith.

"Seems to me you take it pretty easy," Jack chaffed. "What'd he leave you, a cool million, or was it three?"

"I never thought to ask."

"If that isn't just like a girl! Up in the clouds, planning a new hat, I suppose. Who told you?"

"Mr. Lathrop."

"Mr. Lathrop? You don't mean — *The thing isn't true!*"

Judith smiled into the boy's incredulous face.

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"Yes, it's true. Mr. Lathrop read me the will. There isn't a tremendous lot of money,—'more than a competence,' he said. I ——"

But Judith's words were drowned in a shout from the boys.

"Hurrah!"

"Good for you!"

"Say, Cousin Ju, that's great!"

"What made him do it?"

"Didn't know you knew the gentleman."

"Honest, is it really so?"

Judith beamed. "There was a condition I didn't like, so I'm not going to get the money, but I think it was nice of him."

"You're not going to get the money! What was the condition?"

"I'd have to go away to a school for two years," said Judith simply.

"Well, why not?"

"Because I don't want to."

Jack's eyes bored for a minute into hers. "You mean you'd have to clear out and leave this?" The jerk of his head indicated the room where they sat.

"That's about it."

Jack rose from his seat. "Then I'm going this minute to tell Mr. Lathrop you have changed your mind."

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"But I haven't."

"Well, I have for you. We all have. Is there anybody in this room who wants Cousin Judith to let a 'competence' slip through her fingers in order to stay here and run our affairs for us?"

"They're my affairs just as much as yours," Judith put in, but her voice was lost in the din of denial.

"My dear," said gentle Mrs. French, "we could not let you make such a sacrifice for us."

Judith's gray eyes swept the circle. "You don't understand. It isn't a sacrifice."

"That is very noble of you, dear——"

Judith was guilty of interrupting. "It isn't noble!" she cried. "I never heard there was anything noble about doing what you just plain wanted to do."

But Jack was making for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To see Mr. Lathrop."

"Don't! Not yet. Let me talk to you."

"You may talk to me all night. If you do, I'll go in the morning."

"You don't understand," said Judith.

But in the morning Jack went.

CHAPTER XVIII

HELEN TRIES HER HAND

"THE hermit has left Judith a whole lot of money and she won't take it."

Anne exploded this bomb in Helen's ears the minute dinner was over at Mr. Lathrop's.

"The hermit has—*what?*"

Anne repeated.

Helen sank down weakly on the top step of her own porch. "What did he do that for?" she asked. Then the last part of the statement struck her and she leaped up as suddenly as she had sat down and seized Anne's arm. "Won't take it!" she gasped. "Did you say she won't take it? Why won't she take it?"

The gate clicked and Grace and Sally hurried up the path.

"Is it true?" Grace squealed, sending her voice ahead of her. "Is it really true that——"

"S-s-s-sh!" Anne warned.

"Then it is true!" Grace cried. "There's no use s-shing. Father heard it on the street this afternoon. Oh, isn't it glorious, glorious, glorious!"

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She caught Sally in her arms and waltzed ecstatically to the foot of the steps.

"It's exactly as though he'd really been the great-uncle!" Sally rejoiced, careless of antecedents. "I never heard of anything so exciting. Is Judith terribly rich, Anne?"

On the happy exclamations Anne's words fell chillingly. "Judith says she can't take the money."

"Can't—what?" Grace could not believe her ears.

"You don't mean she's refused it!"

"That's just what I do mean, Sally."

Grace broke into a splutter of questions. "But how can she? Wasn't it left to her? What makes her want to refuse it? And, anyway, she can't, can she? When a man's dead, don't you have to take what he gives you?"

Gay's voice spoke over Grace's shoulder. "Go it, Gracie. You'll find out a lot if you keep right on talking. What's the row?"

"The hermit has left Judith a pile of money and she's refused it," said Helen.

"Refused it!"

The four wagged their heads solemnly.

"But why?" Gay persisted.

"Why, Anne?" Helen asked. "You hadn't told me why."

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"The will says Judith must go away to school for two years and she won't leave her cousins."

"Those dreadful fifth cousins!" Grace exclaimed. "I've always said I wished we had never found them."

"I don't," said Anne. "I like them."

"So do I," Helen agreed. "But—but—— She must take the money."

"Of course she must," Gay said briskly. "Here's Stella. I thought she'd be along pretty soon. It's all so, Stella, what you telephoned, only more so. Is Mary on the way?"

"I saw her from the corner, but I simply couldn't wait for her to catch up. Tell me the 'more so,' quick."

They told her, and then they had to tell it all over again to Mary.

"Judith will change her mind," said Mary, "when she has had time to think about it."

"Judith isn't the changeable sort," Estelle objected. "She's stubborn as a mule about some things."

"Well, she's just got to change her mind about this," Grace cried. "Let's go and talk to her."

"Hold on, Gracie!" Gay caught the arm that carried the blue bracelet.

Grace whirled on her. "Don't you think we

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have anything to say about whether or not Judith takes the money? She wouldn't have had the chance to refuse it if it hadn't been for us. We told the hermit about her. That's how he found her out. I don't think Judith had any right to refuse that money without consulting us. It's our business almost as much as hers."

"He didn't leave it to us," said Gay. "But I'm not against talking to Judith. All I wanted to say was that she's probably talking a blue streak to-night as it is."

"That is so," Mary agreed. "Those French boys will have something to say. I don't believe Jack French will let her refuse it."

"He'd better not!" flashed belligerent Grace.

"Gay wants us to wait till to-morrow," said Estelle, "and I think Gay's right."

"I hate putting things off till to-morrow," Sally sighed.

"So do I, when it's talking to Judith," averred Grace. "The thing might be all settled for keeps before we could see her, and settled wrong."

"No," said Anne. "Grandfather told her to wait and talk with people. She must understand exactly what she was doing."

"And to think," cried Helen, whose mind had bridged the chasm of doubt to the joyful ground of Judith's ultimate acceptance, "to think that we

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did it, just as Grace says. Oh, isn't it wonderful!"

"We are rather marvelous," Gay acknowledged. "It's a wonder to me that the town takes so little notice of us. Get Judith over here to-morrow afternoon, Nell, and if the French boys haven't turned her no inside out, till you can't tell it from yes, we'll try our hand."

"Try!" Grace exclaimed. "We'll do it, too."

But even Grace acknowledged the following afternoon that F. O. C. had undertaken no easy task. In vain Gay cajoled and amused; in vain Grace scolded and teased; in vain Helen pleaded and Sally chattered and Estelle caressed and Mary argued. In vain Anne smiled. Judith was not to be moved.

"You'd have your fifth cousins just the same," Mary urged at last.

"Yes," said Helen. "Only you'd be away at school for two years the way my sister Phillis is. This house is her house and of course she always comes home for vacations and we write and she writes. You could do that. And then when the two years were up you could stay at home with Mrs. French always, if you wanted to."

"Think of all the nice things you could do for people with that money," Estelle besought.

"Think of those fifth cousins," Gay suggested

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adroitly. "They're splendid boys. I'll bet if their father hadn't died some of them would have gone to college. Think of all the things you could do for them."

"I've thought of that now," said Judith. "I didn't at first. Money didn't mean much to me. You see, I'd never had any. I didn't know what it would do. It meant a lot to Jack. I could see that by the way he talked. But he won't touch a cent of the hermit's money. He won't even take any of it as a loan. He won't let me hire a woman to run the house while I'd be away at that school. He tells me I'm free. Free! What do I want to be free for? There is such a thing as being too free. Jack don't know anything about it, but there is. Oh, he'll let me call it home on Oak Street. They'll be delighted to see me vacations, if I care to come. As though I didn't know, and he didn't know that I know, that some woman has got to run that Oak Street house to keep them all going. The body they'd hire wouldn't love it as I love it, and to pay her Don would have to leave school. Oh, I know."

Judith stopped abruptly, but nobody spoke.

"I know another thing, too. I know how bad Jack wanted to go to college. He was going to be a lawyer. He and his father had it all planned between them. Mother French told me that weeks

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ago. But Jack won't listen to using some of the hermit's money to go to college on. It's my money, he says. He can't borrow a girl's money. It would be years before he could pay me back. 'Let it be years!' I said to him. 'What would I care how many years it might be?' I tried to get at him by way of Don and Pat. He was as stiff-necked about them as he is about himself. What good would that money do me if I couldn't do with it one thing I wanted to and if it lost me my folks, besides? Tell me that."

Estelle slipped an arm around Judith's waist. Anne's was already in place, squeezing sympathetically. Grace camped on the rug at Judith's feet, blinking rapidly, her elbows in Judith's lap.

"Jack needs a whipping," Gay announced in tones that suggested she knew one who would like to administer it.

"Doesn't he!" breathed Helen.

"No," Judith defended. "He's just a cousin, that's all—a fifth cousin. That kind of cousin ain't like real folks. I thought they were. I know better now. They won't let you do things for 'em the way your real folks would. They can't help it. They're—they're fifth cousins. I said to Jack, 'If I'd been your sister now, born your real flesh-and-blood sister ——' He said to me, 'You're the best sort in the world, Judith. I wouldn't ask

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for any better sister, but you're not my sister. And that's the fact.' I'd been dreaming, you see. I've waked up now."

When had anybody ever heard such a note in cheerful Judith's voice? A tear slid over Grace's eyelid and coursed down her cheek. Another followed.

"Why, Gracie, you're crying!"

"I'm not either, and if I am, it's because we found those fifth cousins. You all know I never wanted to find them."

"What I wish," said Judith, "is that you'd never tried to find a great-uncle for me. But there, you were doing the best you knew how, and it was real kind of you."

"We don't seem to have done anything right," mourned Helen.

"It wouldn't have done any harm to see the hermit, if he hadn't left me the money," Judith explained. "I can't take it and keep my folks and I guess I can't refuse it and keep 'em either. Seems if I lose out whatever I do. But, anyway, I'm not going to take pay for losing 'em."

"Does Jack know you won't take the money, unless he will promise to help spend it?" Anne questioned.

"I've told him times enough. He says I can't help taking it."

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F. O. C. surveyed each other in consternation. The situation presented a complete deadlock.

"Everything has come out just the way we wanted it to," mused Gay. "We wanted money for Judith. She wanted a big family, all boys and a baby. We've found exactly what we set out to find and we're none of us happy. We must be hard to suit."

"How can you joke, Gay?"

"I'm not joking, Stella. I'm stating facts."

Helen emerged from a brown study and sat up abruptly. "Jack has just got to give in."

Judith shook her head. "You don't know the stuff that Jack's made of. Let's not talk about it. Talking don't do any good. Is your mother home, Helen?"

Helen jumped up hastily. "Indeed she is. And she wants to see you."

Judith turned on the threshold. "I'm sorry I've made you all feel bad. There's just one thing I want to say and I want you to believe it, every one of you. I'm glad of what I've had this spring. I never had had any folks before, and you found me some. They were real folks all right, until yesterday. I know now what it feels like to have had folks, and I never expected to know that. I guess I'm a pretty lucky girl. So don't you feel bad. Just give me a little time to get used to

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things all over again. They make me sort of dizzy, they jump about so."

In the next room, on a low seat at Mrs. Thayer's knee, Judith poured out her story. "I thought those girls were going to get a jolt, didn't I?" she finished. "Well, it's me got the worst jolt, and I wasn't looking for it. Queer how quick you can get out o' the habit of knowing what to do with a jolt. Here I was thinking nothing could upset me. I didn't expect anything. Then what I didn't expect happened and I—well, I thought there weren't going to be any more jolts, I guess. I thought now I'd got folks I'd always keep 'em. There's more than one way of losing your folks. Finding that out is about the worst jolt I ever had, but I'll brace up. Jack's too polite to say so, but I can see he thinks I'm a donkey-headed idiot not to jump at that money. Do you think so, Mrs. Thayer?"

"I think you are a very clear-headed girl, Judith," said Helen's mother.

"Do you now? I'd like Jack to hear that. It's done me a lot of good to talk right out to you. Mother French ——" Judith laughed a little. "You see it's like this. I talk to her and she sees things as I do. Then Jack talks to her and she thinks he must be right and it was selfish of her to feel the way I want her to. She'd like to think

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my way, but she feels she ought to think his way, and there you are. So I've stopped talking."

Mrs. Thayer laid her hand on the two clasped on her knee. "There is a great deal to be said for Jack's side of the argument, dear."

"I can't see it," said Judith. "I've tried to."

"A great many girls would be glad of the chance to go to Stanton Hall."

"I know that," Judith said, "and I'd go in a minute if Jack would act with that money as though I belonged to the family. I'd hate to be gone so long from that little house on Oak Street—why, Mrs. Thayer, I just love it—but I guess I could stand it, if I knew Jack was going to school, too, and the boys were having a good chance. But if I had to be thinking all the time, 'Because I'm here there aren't any Frenches on Oak Street,' or 'Because I'm here, Don's had to give up school,' I couldn't be happy a minute!"

"What about your own chance, Judith? Your own education?"

Judith smiled straight into Mrs. Thayer's face. "That's Mother French. Maybe she isn't a very smart woman. She's not shrewd or a manager. She couldn't keep that house running if she tried. She's pretty and sweet and you want to take care of her. Oh, I know how the boys feel. I want to take care of her, too. She had an education. The

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best kind. She talks better than a book. And her voice—I'd rather hear it than singing. I talk better since I've lived with her. I'll talk better still if I live with her longer. She's my education, Mother French is, and my chance. A person couldn't be uneducated and live with her. A girl like me needs her kind of teaching more than the school kind. But I'll go to that school—I've told Jack I'll go—if he'll play the folks game square. And he won't."

"What could I say?" Mrs. Thayer asked Helen wistfully when Judith had gone.

"I hate Jack!" blazed Helen.

"Jack is thinking of his self-respect," said her mother. "There is a point beyond which self-respect ceases to be a virtue."

Helen did not entirely understand, but the words sounded well. She stored them in her memory. Already she knew of a way to use them, if—— There was no if. Courage had nothing to do with the matter. Had she not made up her mind while the girls were talking?

Standing in the window, she saw Mr. Lathrop's new car sweep in through the gates of the driveway across the street. Mr. Lathrop himself was in the tonneau. Helen gave herself no time to think.

"I want to speak to Don a minute, mother."

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Her heart was pounding as she ran down the path to the street. At the gate she waited seconds or hours; it might have been the one, but it seemed interminably like the other, before Don rounded the corner of the big brick house. Helen hailed him and the boy darted across to her.

"Tell your brother Jack I want to see him to-night."

Only then, when the thing was irrevocably done, did she tell her mother.

"I fear it will do little good, daughter."

"You talk to him, mother."

Mrs. Thayer shook her head. "He will take it better from you, Nell."

"I was the one that first heard of him," Helen explained. "If it hadn't been for that Racefield girl talking to me at the game, Judith might never have found she had any fifth cousins. It makes me feel responsible."

Her mother kissed her. "Success to you, little daughter. Now suppose we get supper."

If it hadn't been for getting supper and eating it, helping the twins undress and telling their bedtime story, Helen hardly knew how she could have lived through the next hours. As it was, she scarcely tasted the food on her plate and her words mixed themselves up so peculiarly that Ted took her sharply to task.

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"Huh! That's a funny story you're tellin' us!"

"What made her want to eat boys?" Tess questioned.

"Folks that eats folks is ca-ca ——"

"Cabinals," Tess prompted.

"Did I say she wanted to eat boys?" Helen queried. "I didn't mean it, twinnies. I meant she wanted to eat rolls and strawberries and splendid things like those and every time she started to take a bite, the rose or the strawberry or whatever it was would turn to money right in her fingers. You can't eat money, you know, and the poor princess was so hungry. You can't think how hungry she was."

"Couldn't she go to the store and buy more berries?" demanded practical Tess.

"Yes, but as sure as she took the basket in her hand and lifted a berry to her lips it turned to money and she had to put it down again."

"Did it, if she was awful quick?" Ted questioned.

"It did, no matter how quick she was."

"If she pretended she wasn't goin' to eat it, just to smell of it," Tess suggested, "an' then popped it in her mouth, did it turn into money then?"

"Whatever she did, it turned into money."

Tess looked worried. "If she couldn't get anythin' to eat, she'd starve."

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"That is what she's afraid of—— I mean, it worried her terribly. So she began trying everything she came to that people ever eat, you know, even crusts of bread without any butter on them."

Helen chose her words carefully now. You had to be careful when you told stories to the twins. The carefulness helped; it took her attention from the ordeal before her. You cannot make up stories correctly out loud and at the same time frame persuasive sentences inside your mind. The persuasive sentences had made Helen feel a little sick. What if, after all, they should not persuade? The story lightened a trifle the weight that burdened her chest.

And then Jack came, smiling, inscrutable, easy. The minute Helen saw his face her heart sank down, down, down, into the very toes of her slippers. If he hadn't smiled, she might have felt less futile as she opened her lips. The smile gilded, as it were, his stubbornness. It seemed to put him immeasurably beyond the reach of the most beguiling of those persuasive sentences that she had so carefully manufactured. The smile and the sense of her own impotence set Helen's temper rising. She forgot the persuasive sentences, which was perhaps the best thing she could have done.

"I want to talk to you about Judith," she said bluntly.

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"I thought so. Fire away, if you want to. But it won't do any good."

"You mean you've made up your mind not to let it do any good."

"My mind's made up. Yes, I mean that."

"Why do you talk about your mind?" she flashed at him. "Haven't the rest of your family minds, too?"

"We think alike on this subject."

"You've made them agree with you."

"Oh, come now. Suppose you were in our shoes."

"Suppose mother and Phillis and Floyd and the twins and I were you and your mother and the boys?"

"Just that."

"And a cousin of ours wanted to send us to college?"

"Put it that way, if you like."

Helen triumphed. "That's the way it is now. Cousin Anne is sending Floyd to college and my sister Phillis to art school."

Jack's dark face grew no whit less pleasant. "You think you've scored, don't you? How old is this Cousin Anne?"

"I don't exactly know. She and mother were girls together."

"Just so."

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Helen detested the sound of that just so. It was so obstinately unpersuaded.

Jack continued. "She isn't a girl now. That's the point. She's a woman who has a right to do what she likes with her money. By the way, what degree of cousinship is it?"

"Mother's first cousin."

"And Judith is our fifth by courtesy."

"I don't see that that makes any difference." The words were weak, and Helen knew it.

"Perhaps not. The other does, though. If my Cousin Judith was like your Cousin Anne I'd borrow from her quicker'n lightning. As things are, I'd be a cad if I borrowed a cent."

"You're a cad now," said Helen.

He stiffened.

"You're a cad to make her feel the way you do. There is a point beyond which self-respect ceases to be a virtue. I should think you'd be ashamed, perfectly ashamed of yourself, Jack French, after Judith's been so happy settling the house and taking care of you boys, to turn her out the way you're doing!"

"We're not turning her out."

It was useless for Jack to try to stem the torrent of Helen's words. "I'd like to know what else you're doing," she stormed. "It's bad enough for a girl to lose her really truly own family before

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she's old enough even to remember them and have to be brought up by an orphan asylum. It's perfectly cruel when she's adopted a family and feels exactly as though it was her own family to wake up some day—that was the word Judith used—to wake up some day and find they're not feeling the way she is at all. Judith says it's not your fault. You're fifth cousins. She'd thought fifth cousins were the same as real folks, but she's found they're not. It made me feel like a funeral to hear her, and to know it was my fault, because I—I told her about you. I wish I'd never seen you. Then she could have had the hermit's money and enjoyed it, too."

"She'll enjoy it now," said Jack.

"She won't either. I don't know that she'll even take it. She says she isn't going to accept pay for losing her 'folks.'"

"Talk," said Jack.

Helen's eyes blazed. "Now you're nasty."

"I beg your pardon. I only meant that in heat a person often says things she doesn't stick to afterward."

"Judith sticks."

"Yes," said Jack, "she does. But I can't take her money."

"No," Helen shot back, "you can't give up your stubborn old way. You're not worth even being Judith's thirty-fifth cousin."

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"That's all right. I'm not saying I am. I'm only saying ——"

"Oh, dear," Helen cried, "I'm sick of hearing you say it over and over that you can't—take—Judith's—money. Nobody is thinking about you. Who cares whether you go to college or not? It's Judith we care about. We want her to be happy. Go and talk to Mr. Lathrop if you don't believe me. Mr. Lathrop wants her to be happy, too. Nobody's interested in your old self-respect."

In tears Helen sought her mother ten minutes later.

"I was horrid," she wailed, "perfectly horrid, but I didn't cry till he'd gone—with his head in the air. Oh, I hate him! I got mad and I said just what came into my mind, and it wasn't a bit nice. He exasperated me so, mother. How could I ever have thought he was nice! And he's simply *adamant* about Judith."

CHAPTER XIX

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

HELEN woke the next morning to a gloomy world. Not physically. The sun shone, the leaves danced, the flowers smiled, but not for Helen. For the first moment, indeed, after her eyes opened sleepily on the new day she did not know it was dreary. Then remembrance rushed on her, blotting out sunny June. Helen groaned and clasping the pillow in both arms, buried her face in it. Under the pillow her hand encountered the damp crumpled ball of last night's handkerchief. She had cried herself to sleep. She wished she could cry herself to sleep again. Not that she felt any desire to cry this morning; she seemed for the moment cried out. But she would like to go to sleep and wake up to a situation different from that on which she had last closed her eyes.

This being obviously out of the question, she rose slowly and dressed languidly. What was there to hurry about? The day tasted ill in her mouth. It held out no saving possibilities. Its hours stretched, drab and tired and dull, ahead of her. She had failed. Her failure would not have

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mattered much, had there remained a chance for some one else to succeed. But who would try? And trying, who would fare more happily? Perhaps if she had not lost her temper, if she had talked very quietly and gently, without any heat and feeling—"But I can't do that," Helen thought. "When I feel strongly about something, no matter how hard I try to keep cool, I get excited. Mother's right, though. It would be better if I kept cool. I'll try—next time. Oh, I hope there will never be any next time as bad as this."

And then the beautiful persuasive sentences began again in her head, only more beautiful, more persuasive. There were new sentences, wonderful words that could not fail to have brought Jack to terms if she had only thought of them. What was the use of thinking of them now when it was too late? But here they came, storming Helen's brain, the convincing things she might have said. Her mind raced round and round among them like a squirrel circling the bars of its revolving cage. They ran through the day monotonously; through breakfast and between classes at school and after school, whirling in one glorious, triumphant, forever lost opportunity.

They were whirling most exultantly near mid-afternoon. Nothing interfered with them. Helen was wandering in the yard ostensibly looking at

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peony buds. Swift feet beat on the path that led to the kitchen door, thudded across the grass, and reached her side. Arms went around her neck.

"How did you do it?" cried Judith's voice. "I didn't think anybody could do it, and you—you're a great girl, Helen Thayer. My, but I'm happy! I didn't think I'd ever be so happy again, and now—well, now I guess I never was so happy before."

Words tumbled out of Helen's mouth, words disarranged by her total inability to understand what Judith was saying.

"Happy! You don't mean —— What has happened? Judith, tell me quick what has happened!"

Judith nodded and laughed and capered, behaving altogether like a person who finds herself supplied with too few ways of expressing her feelings. "Don't you know? You ought to. But maybe he hadn't made up his mind when he left you. Jack goes slow, but he's thorough. When he does a thing ——"

"Jack!"

"Told me this noon," Judith beamed. "Ate his words like a man. Said he guessed he'd been trying so hard to stand up straight, he'd bent backwards. Said you told him to talk to Mr. Lathrop ——"

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"I!"

"Didn't you?"

"Yes, but—I thought he didn't care about what I said."

"He talked with Mr. Lathrop this morning early. Then he thought a while. That's Jack all over. At dinner he asked me if I could manage to hold down my job as treasurer of French, French & Company with all the other things I was getting to do. I didn't know what was coming, but I said I could. Then Jack said, 'How about it, fellows? Shall we let her?' You ought to 've seen the boys. Bless 'em! We're going to keep on this summer just as we planned. That's to prove to ourselves we don't have to use Mr. Marcus French's money to live on. It's an extra. School for Jack and me both in the fall. He's sure he can finish getting ready for college and run his job, too. He's to write to-night and apply again to the place where he'd meant to go before his father died. We'll have to hunt up a good woman to run the house while we're both gone. Oh, Jack backed down handsomely, that's just what he did."

Anne joined the two. "I saw you," she said, "and you looked so—so glad, some way—I ran right over."

"I *am* glad." Judith's smile almost buttoned

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behind her ears, it was so wide. "I've got my folks back again, Anne. And now I'm going to keep 'em forever 'n ever, amen. There's a whole summer ahead of us. No use thinking about fall yet. A whole summer to make jelly and take care of my folks in. Next week I've got to go down to New York and see Mr. Marcus French's cousin. She wants me to come. There was something about it in the will, too. But what's two days against—— Well, I'm not counting. I don't want to know how many days there are. Let's go in and tell your mother, Nell, and then find the other girls."

The three skipped joyfully across the sunny grass.

"It's a great day, isn't it?" cried Judith. "A great day." She lifted her face to the turquoise sky.

"It's beautiful," breathed Helen and Anne fervently.

"And I'm a lucky girl. But I never was luckier than when you made me the Secret." The steadfast gray eyes twinkled happily on the two friends. "Don't things just come my way, though?"

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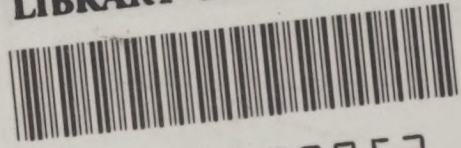
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